Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 February 2017

Dominican Republic: Teachers continue strike over wage demand

Teachers at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) continued the strike they began January 26. Chief among their demands is a 40 percent increase in professors' salaries. Other demands are construction of more classrooms and labs, creation of more sections, capitalization of the pension plan and updating of the digital platform.

While some students have protested the teachers' strike, others have voiced support for their demands. On February 8, FAPROUASD, the professors' organization, called on the UASD rector Iván Grullón to present a proposal, but he did not respond by the 5:00 deadline, leaving the strike still in effect. A few teachers, although they consider the demands justified, have continued teaching.

Puerto Rican workers protest against government's austerity policies

Hundreds of workers from both the private and public sectors congregated outside the Puerto Rico Convention Center in San Juan February 9 to protest recent laws enacted to shift the burden of the island's fiscal crisis onto the back of the working class.

The demonstration was organized by the Federal Workers Central in collaboration with dozens of unions and social organizations. The mobilization was held as Governor Ricardo Rosselló and other government figures met with Puerto Rico Manufacturers Association bigwigs inside the heavily-guarded venue to discuss how to further put the squeeze on the working class.

A particular target of the protest was the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act, known as Promesa (Spanish for 'promise'), which contains deep budget cuts and attacks on workers' rights and job stability. Union leaders denounced the labor reforms and promised to continue the protests.

Fourth strike by Bolivian health workers to demand sacking of director

Workers for Bolivia's National Health Fund (CNS) struck for the fourth time last week to demand the firing of the director of the agency, Juan Jordán, who they claim has no experience with or understanding of the public health sector. Three previous stoppages, beginning in December, were for one, two and three days, with the latest declared "indefinite."

The government demanded that the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) tell the CNS workers to lift the strike and reactivate dialogue. CNS says that it will not accept conditions until Jordán is let go.

Chilean copper miners strike over pay, bonuses, benefits, conditions

Workers at the world's largest copper mine complex, the Escondida mine near Antofagasta, Chile, downed their tools February 9. The 2,500 workers, members of the Escondida No. 1 Union, are demanding that the company retain benefits, which it had said it was going to cut, and agree to distribute benefits equally among new as well as longtime workers.

The union is also demanding a 7 percent wage hike and a bonus equivalent to US$39,000. Escondida management has offered a bonus of US$13,000 and no raise. Other concerns are safety, working conditions and job security. Union officials referred to a recent fire that injured seven workers. In January, around 90 workers were fired.

Workers have set up an encampment near the mine, where they have stockpiled supplies. They are alternating two 12-hour shifts. Union officials claim that they can maintain the strike for at least two months.

Argentine bank workers vote to strike over parity talks, government policy

In over 1,000 assemblies across Argentina, members of the bank employees' union, known as La Bancaria, voted in favor of strike action. The bank workers are demanding that the Labor Minister, Jorge Triaca, standardize parity talk agreements across the sector.

Union head Sergio Palazzo complained to reporters that the government of Mauricio Macri "came to consolidate inequity and injustice," as shown by the growth in the number of informal

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workers, who earn inferior pay, in banking and other sectors. The union is calling on the minister to standardize the “pre-agreement” signed in November 2016 between the banks and La Bancaria.

Palazzo also called attention to the agreement by 80 percent of bank management representatives to raise wages by 24.2 percent for the year, in view of the projected inflation rate of 17 percent. However, the Bank Association of Argentina, which represents international banks, did not sign the agreement, and the Labor Ministry filed an appeal of a labor court decision in favor of standardizing the agreement across the sector.

Bank workers stopped work for the last three hours of the workday on February 11, and La Bancaria scheduled assemblies for February 13 to decide on a date for a 24-hour strike, which Palazo said could be in February.

Argentine omnibus drivers strike over unpaid wages, working conditions

Omnibus drivers serving Argentina’s seaside resort city of Mar del Plata began strike action February 9. The UTA tram drivers’ union called the walkout to demand payment of overdue wages and improvement of what it described as “dreadful working conditions.”

The drivers are employees of long-distance omnibus company El Rápido Argentino, which is currently up for sale. UTA head Roberto Fernández voiced concerns that one of the prospective purchasers, called “20 de Septiembre,” would likely drop its service to Mar del Plata, putting about 150 drivers in jeopardy.

Wisconsin workers strike over increasing burden of health care costs

Some 60 workers at AxleTech International in Oshkosh, Wisconsin went on strike February 6 after workers rejected the company’s previous offer by a wide margin one day earlier. United Auto Workers Local 291 said the failure of wages to keep up with the growing cost of health care being shouldered by workers was a major source of discontentment by strikers.

AxleTech International, which supplies axles and other components for Oshkosh Corporation’s military vehicles, was repurchased by the Carlyle Group in January of last year. A 2015 estimate ranked Carlyle as the largest private equity firm in the world based on capital raised in the previous five years.

UAW Local 291 president, Bob Mitchell, said at the time of Caryle’s purchase of AxleTech, “They know our business pretty darn well and we had a good experience with them last time. We’re here to partner up. We’re stakeholders, too. We want to have the dialogue and an open relationship.” Last fall, AxelTech laid off 57 workers. This came on top of a layoff of 65 workers in 2013.

Concerning the current negotiations over health care costs, Mitchell declared, “I can tell you that we realize the company can’t carry all the burden themselves...”

California contract workers strike delays missile launch

Over a dozen contract workers at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, walked out on strike February 7 over an unfair labor practice violation. The strike by more than a dozen workers for RG Next who are charged with planning and monitoring missile launches caused a 24-hour delay of a Minuteman III test launch.

The unfair labor practice charge has to do with RG Next management’s attempt to interrogate workers as to whether they would strike. But wages and benefits play a role as well. Teamsters Local 986, which represents the striking workers, told TV station KSBY, “We have other bargaining unit groups with the Teamsters here at Vandenberg and we are seeking to bring their level of benefits up to par with those other groups.”

Workers rejected the company’s final offer before walking out. Negotiations have been ongoing for the past six months and a new round of talks between the Teamsters and RG Next were to restart February 13.

Nova Scotia Liberals move to impose teachers’ contract

The Liberal government of provincial Premier Stephen McNeil meets Tuesday to end a 10-week work-to-rule by 9,300 public school teachers in Nova Scotia. The teachers’ action has garnered significant support from parents and students from across the province. Last week, teachers voted for a third time to turn down a tentative deal negotiated by their union and recommended by the leadership. Despite being forced to vote on a virtually identical contract for a third time, teachers rejected their union’s recommendation by an overwhelming 79 percent.

Union president Liette Doucet has signaled that she will honor the imposition of a contract by the legislature and end the job action once the government bill becomes law as early as next week. Doucet, in buckling to the government’s imminent attack on the rights of her membership, simply asked that the government show some “patience and courtesy” so that the union can participate in the anti-democratic process initiated by McNeil. Teachers have been demanding that the government reverse years of underfunding for education to improve conditions in the classrooms.

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