

Workers Struggles: the Americas

28 February 2017

Puerto Rican demonstrators protest cuts to university budget

More than a thousand demonstrators—workers, students and members of social organizations—converged on Puerto Rico’s Capitol in San Juan February 23. The demonstration was held to protest the fiscal plan submitted to the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board by Governor Ricardo Rosselló, which includes drastic cuts to the budget of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR).

The presence of the Tactical Operations Unit of the Puerto Rican Police guarding the entrance to the Capitol made for tension, but no physical confrontations were reported.

The protest came one day after thousands of UPR students voted to strike in protest against the cuts, which would amount to at least \$300 million as demanded by the control board. “Five of 11 [UPR] campuses ... have been affected by strikes that began Wednesday and are expected to continue all week,” reported *caribbeanbusiness.com*. A number of top UPR officials have resigned to protest the proposed fiscal cuts.

UPR has already lost hundreds of millions of dollars due to previous austerity measures, José Raúl Rivera, president of the Association of Puerto Rican University Professors told the crowd. He cited examples of other countries—Greece, Chile and others—that had imposed austerity measures, and the resultant increases in poverty and inequality. Rivera urged the assembled protesters to appeal to legislators to change their minds.

Antigua and Barbados: Vector control workers get long-delayed raises following strike, protests

On February 22, the Central Board of Health (CBH) of Antigua and Barbados announced that it was upgrading wages for about 70 vector control workers after years of low pay and no raises. The workers, who have protested before, held a strike on February 7, after which they were told that it would be at least six weeks before they would get a raise.

Among the lowest-paid of government workers, the vector workers protested and complained that they could not make ends meet on their paltry salaries, especially since prices

continue to rise. Some earned a weekly wage of 337 Caribbean dollars (XCD), or barely US\$125.

CBH Chief Health Inspector Lionel Michael told *Antigua Observer* reporters that the raises will go into effect March 1. Lower-paid workers will get between 451 and 498 XCD (US\$167 and 184), with higher-level staff getting from 519 to 745 XCD (US\$192 to 275).

Chilean mineworkers continue strike as union obtains loan

The strike that 2,500 mineworkers at the Chilean Escondida mine complex began on February 8 continues as negotiations between their union, Escondida No. 1, and management remain stalled. The workers are demanding wage improvements, a three-year contract, equity for new-hires and a bonus. The company is refusing the raise and at the same time, proposing cuts in some benefits.

Union officials, who said that the strike and encampment at the mine entrance could last two months, announced the securing of a loan February 24 from a Chilean credit union. The loan, worth about US\$1.5 million, was signed on January 26. If the strike goes beyond the two-month period, the union has made arrangements with other agencies.

The loan money, however, had not been delivered by Friday, February 24. Union head Carlos Allendes said “We could have to resolve this legally next week.”

That same day, leaders of three Chilean unions held a demonstration in front of BHP Billiton, Escondida’s majority stakeholder. “The demonstrators said BHP Billiton had the resources to wait out the striking employees and accused it of inventing a copper crisis to reduce its labor expenses,” reported the *Latin American Herald Tribune*.

Argentine teachers’ union rejects governor’s raise, calls for strike

The Argentine Republic Education Workers Confederation (CTERA) rejected Buenos Aires provincial governor María

Eugenia Vidal's proposed 18 percent wage raise offer on February 24. CTERA has called a national 48-hour strike for March 6 and 7 to which the Unified Buenos Aires Education Workers Syndicate (Suteba) has announced it will adhere.

Nationwide, teachers' unions are demanding at least a 30 percent increase to counteract Argentina's chronically underestimated inflation rate and are calling for parity talks with the Labor Ministry. CTERA secretary general Sonia Alesso, noting the "strong motivation" for the walkout, told reporters that teachers' salaries "don't last until the end of the month" and in a context in which "prices and inflation impacted purchasing power."

Alesso's statement was in response to Labor Minister Sebastián García de Luca's assertion that the strike was a political move by Suteba head Roberto Baradel, "who prioritizes his partisan interests and holds public school children hostage." De Luca further claimed that because of Baradel's links with the previous administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, "the inequalities of the kirchnerista decade are going to deepen," in contrast to supposed improvements in public education under the administration of Mauricio Macri.

Provincial government authorities have said that Vidal will decree obligatory conciliation (binding arbitration) talks and will impose the 18 percent raise unilaterally. In general, public opinion does not hold Argentina's unions in high esteem, a fact that accounts for the government's confrontational posture, and has led to concerns, expressed in private among union bureaucrats, that the macrista administration wants a conflict to weaken the unions.

Washington state Teamsters strike over company's failure to make court-ordered back payments

Three-dozen workers at the Yakima, Washington soda manufacturer Noel Canning went on strike February 20 over unfair labor practices. Teamsters Local 760, which represents the striking workers, charges that the company has refused to pay negotiated pension rates and signing bonuses, along with barring union reps from entering the plant and discrimination against pro-union workers who wear the Teamsters logo.

In a National Labor Relations Board case dating back to 2010, the labor board ruled that the company was required to issue back pay to the legitimate claims of workers. To this day, the company, according to the union, has refused to make payments.

Florida state legislative bill would lead to decertification of

public-sector unions

A new bill filed in the Florida state house takes advantage of the dwindling support among public-sector workers for their unions to automatically decertify their labor organizations once their dues-paying membership falls below 50 percent.

Currently, public-sector unions are required to report the number of workers eligible for union representation along with the exact number of workers who are dues-paying members. The new bill would amend the labor law so that "an employee organization that has been certified as the bargaining agent for a unit whose dues-paying membership is less than 50 percent of the employees eligible for representation in that unit must petition ... for recertification as the exclusive representative of all employees in the unit."

Florida's American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees represents 47,596 workers but has only 1,335 dues-paying members. The Florida Nurses Association represents 2,879 workers with only 228 dues-paying members.

Toronto area city workers strike ends

Inside workers for the City of Cambridge, Ontario, an hour west of Toronto, are back on the job after ratification of a new contract last Thursday that ended a week-long strike.

The job action by 163 workers included administrative staff, building inspectors and other service workers who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Outside workers for the City who are represented by the same union signed a new contract the previous week ending a strike in early February.

The new contract includes provisions on central issues raised in the dispute such as grandfathering of some wage provisions, with cost of living increases for others, providing an overall patchwork of improvements for workers in the same union local.



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