

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Class struggle heats up in Latin America

28 March 2017

Anti-austerity protests in Argentina

Tens of thousands of teachers and other workers marched in the capital Buenos Aires on March 22, as part of a nationwide school strike against President Mauricio Macri's austerity measures. Teachers at private and public schools are demanding 35 percent raises to compensate for rising prices. Last year Argentina's inflation rate was 40 percent.

The teachers' strike began on March 6 after provincial governments offered raises of barely half of the educators' demands. Some provincial walkouts have ended and classes have resumed. Macri denounced the strike, comparing it to the Hiroshima bombing.

Opposition to the government is growing after Macri fired tens of thousands of state workers and slashed utility subsidies, forcing Argentina's largest union to call for a nationwide strike on April 6.

Mexican and Venezuelan bus drivers strike

Over 500 bus drivers for Choferes del Sur, a bus company in Oaxaca, Mexico began a strike on March 20 over wages and work conditions. The strikers are members of the pretentiously named Authentic Revolutionary Socialist Labor Federation of the Mexican Republic (Forasrm). A Forasrm spokesman told *Jornada*, "None of our rights have been respected over the years, the bosses don't give us anything. We don't have vacations or aguinaldos [end-of-year bonuses]." Drivers often are forced to work up to 16 hours per day.

While awaiting a ruling from the labor body this week, Forasrm has indicated that 40 percent of the fleet of buses will remain in operation "so as not to affect the citizens."

Bus drivers in Los Valles del Tuy—which constitutes five municipalities in Venezuela's northern state of Miranda—also carried out a one-day strike on March 23. The

walkout involved urban, suburban and interurban routes. Accepting government claims that there is not enough money to provide maintenance to buses, which often break down, the union called for a fare hike to begin in April, although it called for adjustments to student fares.

In Sotillo, in the eastern state of Anzoátegui, 200 drivers struck for 12 hours to demand batteries and tires from the state government. And in the northwestern state of Zulia, representatives of drivers met in the state capital Maracaibo to plan for a strike March 30 over labor conditions and lack of supplies.

Guyanese university workers protest delays in salary talks

Picket lines were set up at the administrative offices of the University of Guyana March 22 by members of the University of Guyana Workers Union and the University of Guyana Senior Staff Association. Workers protested delays over wage negotiations. The *Guyana Times* reported that the "UG administration seems determined to withhold, indefinitely, the 15 percent increase recommended by the Government in the last budget."

The administration wants to tie the negotiations with a recent unpopular tuition hike, a tactic that the unions denounce as a means of pitting the workers against the students. Although union officials made no mention of a strike, the *Times* noted, "The irate workers will continue this industrial action [picketing] until a favorable response is given by the Management of the University of Guyana."

Union capitulates, ending 43-day Chilean copper mine strike without meeting worker demands

Following the breakdown of talks between the management of Chile's Escondida mine complex and union bargainers, the mineworkers' union Escondida No. 1 announced March 24 it was ending the strike that started on February 9. The union capitulated to threats by management, which threatened to restart production and recruit scabs.

None of the outstanding demands that provoked the strike—a raise, a bonus, equal benefits between new and veteran workers, keeping current benefits and preventing shifts from becoming more demanding—have been resolved. The union is boosting illusions that a new labor law, which will take effect in April, will accept previously existing benefits as the starting point for new negotiations scheduled for June 2018.

Meanwhile, a strike by 1,300 workers at the Cerro Verde mine, Peru's largest copper mine, has entered its third week, continuing in defiance of a government decree declaring the action illegal.

Jamaican hospital workers strike, protest violence against staff

Nonmedical workers at the Bustamante Children's Hospital in Kingston, Jamaica struck on March 23 the morning after an incident in which a health records technician was injured. Late on the night of March 22, a man who had brought his child for treatment of a nonemergency problem, angered after waiting more than three hours, smashed a window. Splinters from the shattered glass lodged in the worker's eye and she had to undergo emergency surgery to remove them.

Jamaica's hospitals are known for their long waiting times, and the frustration of patients' relatives has bubbled over more than once. At Bustamante, the only children's hospital in the English-speaking Caribbean, two such incidents have occurred in the last month. In one, a woman hit a doctor and in another a man pulled a knife on a doctor, both after being told that they would have to wait.

The Union of Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Personnel has limited the demands of the strike to increased security, ignoring the issues of short-staffing, budget cuts and the social crisis that endangers both patients and health care workers.

Illinois meatpacking workers strike over seniority and work shifts

Over 300 workers walked off the job at Holten Meat's in Sauget, Illinois, March 18 over threats to seniority rights and compulsory weekend shifts. Workers voted by a 124 to 38 margin to reject the company's last offer, which doesn't allow night-shift workers to use their seniority to bid on day-shift jobs. Instead of honoring seniority, Holten is hiring new workers off the street to fill day-shift openings.

Workers are also opposed to a company rule whereby they are compelled to work Saturday or Sunday and forfeit working one day during the Monday through Friday shift. The policy presents problems, such as obtaining childcare for some, while others see the rule as a loophole for the company to avoid paying overtime.

The workers, who are members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 655, have gone without a contract for three months. In February, they voted by 133 to 1 to reject an earlier offer by management. Holten is a subsidiary of Branding Iron Holdings Inc. In 2016, the parent company had revenues of \$400 million.

Yukon town workers locked out

Twenty-one workers in the Town of Watson Lake, in the southern Yukon Territory, were locked out this week for six hours after talks broke down last month following 10 months of unsuccessful bargaining.

The workers are represented by the Yukon Employees Union under the umbrella of the Public Service Alliance of Canada and have been without a contract since the end of 2015, after their previous contract was extended for a year.

Workers voted in favor of strike action last month. Union leaders say they are seeking modest improvements in wages and working conditions as well as an employee training plan in a new contract, while the Town is saying they need a more cost-effective deal with workers. A lockout allows the employer to suspend the collective agreement and impose "adjustments" as it deems fit.



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