

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Anti-austerity protests hit Argentina, Brazil and Puerto Rico

4 April 2017

Protest against economic policies of Argentina's government draws 150,000

An estimated 150,000 workers and young people demonstrated in Buenos Aires on March 30 to protest the austerity measures imposed by the right-wing government of President Mauricio Macri. The protest follows a national strike by tens of thousands of teachers against skyrocketing prices and a call by the largest national unions for a general strike on April 5-6.

The protest, called by unions and opposition political parties, converged on the Plaza de Mayo, where CTA (Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina—Argentine Central Workers' Union) and CGT (General Confederation of Labor) federations made demagogic remarks exposing their political bankruptcy and treachery. CTA head Hugo Yasky led a chant of "Vamos a volver"—i.e., "Let's go back"—referring to the previous administration of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

Yasky made no mention of the austerity measures that the Kirchner government had imposed during her 2007-2015 administration, leading to disaffection from her Justicialist party and the victory of the right-wing PRO (Republican Proposal) Party's Macri, who has since ramped up the attacks on the working class. According to government figures, some 30 percent of Argentines fall below the official poverty line.

Argentine doctors, health workers hold 48-hour strike

Doctors and health professionals stopped work on March 29 and 30 in 80 public hospitals in Buenos Aires province. Their union, Cicop, which has called nine such limited actions so far this year, said it was seeking a salary raise and "the defense of the right to protest." Union officials warned their "struggle plan" would continue if Governor Maria Eugenia Vidal does not respond. Cicop announced its members will participate in the upcoming nationwide general strike called by the CGT and CTA labor federations for April 5 and 6 to protest Macri's austerity policies.

Protests in Brazil oppose attacks on pensions and jobs

All 26 of Brazil's states, as well as its Federal District, saw protests March 31 against two proposed changes to laws regarding pensions and contract labor. The proposed measures are part of the Michel Temer

administration's agenda of making the working class bear the brunt of the nation's economic crisis.

One law would change the eligibility for drawing a pension from 30 years of employment for women and 35 for men to requiring the worker to reach 65 years of age. The other would make it easier for businesses to employ contract laborers, as well as allowing for a longer period before they would be required to change the workers' status to permanent.

In São Paulo, about 70,000 protesters gathered in the city center, while 15,000 converged on Rio de Janeiro. Other protests had smaller crowds. Union officials, most aligned with the Workers Party (PT), denounced the "golpistas" (coup participants) who removed PT President Dilma Rousseff last August. In their speeches, the bureaucrats tried to foster illusions that the return of the corrupt PT to power would stop the deterioration of working-class living standards.

Puerto Rican public school teachers protest Department of Education policies

Public school teachers, parents and students held a protest March 31 in front of the Department of Education headquarters in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico, to demand Education Secretary Julia Keleher prioritize student needs over demands of the fiscal control board.

That entity is currently devising and imposing austerity measures in response to the island's fiscal crisis, and education has been hit hard. One specific target of the protest is Keleher's announcement that over 300 public schools are slated for closure. More than 7,000 teachers and 60,000 students would be impacted by the shutdowns.

Other planned measures are reduction of workdays—which would lead to lowered income as well as possible firings—and evaluations that teachers describe as "punitive." One teacher told *El Voce* that increased workloads, also part of the board's plans, would return teachers "to slave labor, where we'd have to dedicate three, four and up to six hours after 3:00."

The teachers are affiliated with an organization called the Broad Front in Defense of Public Schools (Fadep), and are members of the Puerto Rico Teachers Federation (FMPR).

Yale shuttle bus drivers threaten to strike

Drivers who operate the fleet of shuttle busses for Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, have threatened to strike this week if an

agreement between First Transit and the Teamsters union is not reached. Around 80 drivers provide day-time and night-time pickups, a Yale-New Haven Hospital and Veterans Administration shuttle, and after-hour services for students, staff and faculty.

Drivers who currently begin at \$13.49 an hour are seeking a \$2.00-per-hour raise, health care benefits and paid holidays. While the Teamsters union is imposing a news blackout, a worker who spoke with the *New Haven Independent* said none of the unionized drivers, even those who currently work full-time, receive benefits or holidays. About half of the drivers work full-time (40 or more hours per week) and half part-time.

At a union meeting “several months ago,” the driver told the *Independent*, the drivers agreed that they could not take the company’s offer of a 2.5 percent wage increase, and the union entered a second round of negotiations with First Transit. “Negotiations seemed slow, the driver said—they and others were not entirely sure that Teamsters had their best interests in mind, or could negotiate for them successfully. Then at a meeting in early February, around 50 of 80 signed a petition to strike ‘near the end of the month.’

“We work hard, and this is what we get,” the driver said. “I believe what we ask for is fair. We’re part of that. It’s like nobody recognizes our job.”

UAW pushes through sellout deal at Arconic plant in Cleveland

United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 150 reported that workers had ratified a new three-year labor agreement Sunday, which covers 640 aluminum workers at the Arconic plant in Cleveland, Ohio. The deal includes a meager 3.0 percent wage increase in the first two years and a 2.5 percent raise in the final year. The raises will be offset by increased out-of-pocket health care costs.

According to a worker at the plant who contacted the *World Socialist Web Site*, the contract expired on February 1 with the company “playing hardball,” including a “last, best offer” that raised insurance and made vacations an earned benefit subject to reductions if workers missed time for sick leave. “They banked on the second-tier employees passing it because we have a little more of them,” he said, referring to the designation of lower-paid workers the UAW sanctioned. Noting that the UAW had kept workers in the dark, he said Arconic had “recorded record sales and profits last year, including \$228 million in sales just from our location.” Meanwhile, the company said workers “did not meet their threshold for profit-sharing checks.”

Arconic, which was formed through a 2016 spin-off from aluminum giant Alcoa, is a major supplier for General Electric, Pratt & Whitney, Boeing, Airbus and Ford. The company, which saw its profit margins more than double between 2008 and 2016, recently told shareholders that over the next three years—which covers the period of the new UAW contract—it intends to increase profit margins from 16.6 percent to 19.0 percent.

West Virginia legislation to deny striking workers unemployment benefits

The West Virginia House of Delegates passed a Republican-sponsored bill that will bar striking workers from receiving unemployment benefits. The 57-42 house vote comes after the state Senate voted by a 22-11 margin along party lines back in February to approve the measure.

The bill would also deny striking workers who have been locked out or have been permanently replaced from receiving benefits.

The unions, which for years relied on paltry jobless payments to protect their strike funds, hardly ever call strikes anymore. Mike Caputo, a Democratic representative from Marion who is also an international vice president for the United Mine Workers of America, revealed that strikes in West Virginia are “so few and far between. ... This system has worked for many, many years, I don’t know anybody in recent history that’s receiving unemployment benefits; I don’t even know anybody in recent history who’s been on strike in West Virginia.”

Canada Bread locks out workers in Quebec and BC

The Canada Bread Company, which is part of Mexican multinational Grupo Bimbo, locked out its workers at a distribution center in Laval, Quebec, northeast of Montreal, last weekend and in Langley, British Columbia.

The 120 workers involved are represented by the Syndicat des Travailleuses et Travailleurs de Distribution Multi-Marques-Laval—CSN. They are fighting a concession-laden contract proposal from Canada Bread, which has also threatened to lock out another 160 workers in the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco, Workers and Grain Millers union (BCTGM).

The union says Canada Bread has been blocking pension payments for years, and last month, employees in Toronto occupied its offices for the same reason.

Quebec transit workers on rotating strike

Transit workers in Gatineau, Quebec, across the river from Ottawa, staged their third one-day strike last week as part of ongoing job action that began in January with an overtime ban and refusal to wear uniforms.

Drivers and mechanics, who are members of the Syndicat uni du transport (SUT), are employed by the Société de transport de l’Outaouais (STO) and have been working without a contract since the end of 2014. The union has been in mediation since November, but there are still outstanding issues around wages, vacation time and job security.

The STO failed in its applications to have the drivers deemed an “essential service,” so as to ban their strike. Arbitration has been proposed, but there is still no agreement on what form it should take.



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