

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 August 2018

One-day strike in Uruguay against business “emptying” of Wages Council

The Uruguayan PIT-CNT labor federation called a 24-hour national strike on August 22 involving the public and private education, health, industry, banking and transport sectors. The federation called the one-day walkout to protest the “emptying” of the Wages Council, which brings together labor, business and government representatives to negotiate wages and conditions.

Business associations have held fast to their demand that wages be frozen for the next two years. The dairy industry has withdrawn from participation in the Council meetings altogether, claiming that it is in a crisis. PIT-CNT accused business of attempting to reverse accomplishments gained by labor.

Union leaders claimed a high level of adherence to the strike and called it “an important landmark.”

Uruguayan anesthesiologists resolve to strike over negotiations

On August 22, members of the Surgical Anesthesiologists Syndicate (SAQ) resolved in assembly to strike for two days beginning August 28. The walkout, which will involve more than 2,000 professionals in both public and private health and private sectors, will be aimed at pressuring the Labor Ministry to hold meetings with SAQ representatives regarding its participation in collective negotiations.

At the meetings, SAQ would advocate a specific anesthesiologists’ subgroup in the framework of the nation’s Wage Councils.

Chilean national police attack, arrest students protesting youth labor law

Over 200 Chilean students marched August 23 through the capital, Santiago, to protest the so-called Youth Labor Statute being promoted by President Sebastián Piñera, who took office in March. The students are members of the Student Confederation of Chile (CONFECH).

The statute would supposedly regulate part-time jobs for students through work contracts and other means in order to help finance their education. “But,” as correodelsur.com reported, “critics point out that in reality they make them more precarious and they are a form of providing businesses, especially commerce, with a cheap labor force,” which would undercut the nonstudent working class.

The law has already passed the lower house and is currently being

debated in the Senate. CONFECH calls the scheme “McInstability,” and students have labeled the proposed statute the “McDonalds Law.” The protesters carried signs and chanted to that effect as they marched toward the Moneda presidential palace.

When the protesting students reached the Alameda, the principal street leading to the Moneda, they were confronted by the Carabineros, Chile’s notorious national police, who attacked them with water cannons and tear gas. Some protesters dispersed, but others confronted the Carabineros. Several dozen were arrested.

Chilean mineworkers strike over company wage offer

Workers at the Andina Division of the National Copper Corporation of Chile (Codelco), located in the country’s Valparaíso region, downed their tools August 13. The walkout followed failed negotiations between bargainers for the company and the 83-member Codelco Andean Division Plant Syndicate (Suplant).

The talks had dragged on for weeks, including 10 days of mediation by the Labor Directorate. Management’s last offer was a 7.9 million peso (US\$11,951) end-of-conflict bonus, “soft” credit of 2.3 million pesos (US\$3,481) and 700,000 additional pesos (US\$1,059). The workers rejected the offer.

Codelco has put a contingency plan in place, involving “shift changes and adjustments to guarantee that those workers who are not on strike can work normally,” according to cadenaser.com. The company claims that production has so far been unaffected.

Paraguayan educators protest retirement plan

Education workers in the Paraguayan capital Asunción and other cities held protests against a retirement plan proposed by the Treasury and given parliamentary approval in May. Various unions and organizations called for the action, among them the Workers Unitary Central, the Education Workers Organization of Paraguay, the Classist Syndical Current, the National Secondary Student Federation, the Working Class Confederation and the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference.

The plan created a Retirement Superintendency to handle the funds. Union leaders have claimed that the goal of the project is not to help retired educators, but to use the monies to finance public works and pay off debts, and would not have guaranteed returns. They have referred to a similar scheme in Chile—as well as one in Paraguay in the 1990s involving a bank that went broke—that produced detrimental

results for workers.

At a protest in front of the National Congress, spokespersons for the coalition, known as the Resistance Tent, urged the Congress to reject the plan and “invite the union leaders to debate over risks and benefits.”

Colombian taxi drivers protest Uber

Thousands of taxi drivers concentrated in downtown Medellín, the capital of Colombia’s Antioquia province, on August 22 to protest against Uber, Cabify and other ride-share services. The cabbies accuse the government of looking the other way while what they call “informal transport” skirts regulations, laws and fees.

The taxi drivers have engaged in discussions with authorities, but have not been satisfied with the results. The taxi drivers have held several anti-Uber protests and stipulated this time not to snarl traffic by driving their cabs to the protests, instead marching with picket signs and chanting.

This time, the mayor’s office, claiming that the drivers had not complied with their agreement not to block traffic, sent police to prevent them from gathering in front of the city’s La Alpujarra Administrative Center. A few drivers who were able to get through tied themselves to some of the building’s pillars and spent the night there.

Washington state farm workers agree to end strike after reaching undisclosed settlement

Some 65 farm workers at Crystal View Raspberry Farms in Whatcom County, Washington, agreed to return to work August 21 after a two-day strike over claims the company failed to issue paychecks and was demanding production quotas that could not be met given the smoke from wildfires.

The workers were brought from Guatemala and Mexico under temporary H2-A visas and had wanted the organization Familias Unidas to represent them. However, the owner of Crystal View refused and instead negotiated with Wafla, a farm-labor workforce agency that was a party to bringing the workers to Washington state to be exploited picking fruit and vegetables for corporate farms. Wafla did not make available any details from the negotiations.

Teamsters order Coca-Cola workers to return to work without contract

The Teamsters called off an 11-day strike August 19 at four Coca-Cola bottling plants in Alabama, its surrender to the company saying, “This will give our members the opportunity to serve the company’s customers in the manner and fashion they have been accustomed to over the years.”

Coca-Cola Bottling Company UNITED, which owns the four plants

in Mobile, Leroy and Robertsdale in Alabama and Ocean Springs, Mississippi, had twice sought to push through contracts seeking to reduce wages for low-seniority workers by \$6 to \$8 an hour. But workers rejected both contracts.

The Teamsters effectively isolated the strike from broader sections of workers. Coca Cola UNITED is the largest privately held Coca-Cola bottler, with some 10,000 employees.

Quebec liquor board workers hold one-day strike

In the second of six planned actions of its kind, workers at the Société des alcools du Québec, or Quebec Liquor Corporation (SAQ), staged a one-day walkout last week in a campaign to bring pressure on the board to negotiate a new contract.

A total of 5,500 workers at 400 SAQ outlets across the province are members of the Syndicat des employé(e)s de magasins et de bureaux de la SAQ (SEMB SAQ) who have been sitting on a strike mandate since early this year. Workers have been without a contract since March 2017, with the main issues in negotiations being weekend work and working conditions. The first walkout was held July 17, and this latest action coincides with the launching of the provincial election in Quebec that will take place October 1.

Court blocks limited job action by Montreal transit union

A proposed overtime ban by Montreal’s transit union, the Société de transport de Montréal, that was to take effect last week has been postponed after a labor tribunal ruled that the essential service staffing levels proposed by the union were insufficient.

The ban was to begin last week and last until the middle of September, but the timing and duration remain in question. This job action was scheduled after workers voted nearly unanimously in favor of a strike in May of this year over outsourcing of work and overtime, with the union claiming that the employer is seeking “to roll back working conditions at all levels.”

The union, which had warned the public that the job action would impact mostly bus routes, has appealed for a government mediator to be brought in to help resolve the dispute.



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