Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 October 2018

Colombian teachers to hold national strike

In the midst of an October 10 protest by thousands of Colombian public university students, their parents, professors and directors, the vice president of the Colombian Educators Federation (Fecode) announced that 290,000 educators would engage in a national strike October 18 in opposition to continuing attacks on public education.

Among the demands is government compliance with the Certificate of Agreements, which Fecode had presented to the Education Ministry in 2014, but was not signed until June 2017. The document has since been ignored by the Colombian government and already prompted a one-day strike in July this year.

The health care system, which Fecode describes as "calamitous," insufficient pay, job instability, overcrowded classrooms and underfunding, are among the more acute problems facing teachers, issues that the government has attempted to ignore.

Argentine bus drivers in partial strike over nonpayment of raises

Members of Argentina's UTA bus drivers union went on a partial work stoppage beginning October 9. From 10:00 pm to 12:30 am, bus service was diminished, and completely stopped from 12:30 am to 6:00 am.

The job action was provoked by failure to honor a 5.7 percent raise that was agreed previously in parity talks. Although some bus companies have complied with the agreed raise, some have yet to deliver on it. In the meantime, UTA and the bus companies have held talks at the Ministry of Labor that have not produced an agreement.

UTA has stated that, barring any agreement, the partial strike would continue through October 17.

Argentine parcel delivery workers union ends two-week strike over pay

The Postal and Telecommunications Employees Free Association (Alecyt) called workers back to their posts on October 12 following a two-week strike against Correo Argentino, a postal, parcel and e-commerce-related delivery service. According to the Alecyt web site, the agreement reached between the federations and the company consists of a fixed sum of 4,000 pesos (US$109) for October, two five percent raises in November for January and February of 2018, and 10 percent in December for March.

On October 1 Alecyt called for "assemblies, a state of alert and other force measures" to demand the reopening of parity talks.

In September, salary talks had resulted in a 7,000 peso (US$190.71) bonus for April-May, an eight percent raise and a revision clause for November. However, the government's March projection of 15 percent inflation proved to be an egregious underestimation and Alecyt issued the strike call for immediate renegotiation of wages. Several other postal unions held protests.

Bahamian doctors vote overwhelmingly for strike action over pay, benefits

Members of the Consultant Physician Staff Association (CPSA) in the Bahamas voted October 9 to strike over longstanding grievances. The CPSA has 110 members, of which 78 voted, with 71 voting in favor of strike action. The vote was supported by the Bahamas Nurses Union, whose president declared that the nurses would stand by the doctors.

A doctor told *Bahama Journal* that the physicians get neither pensions nor health insurance.

The doctors have gone ten years without a raise. They also complain of being excluded from decision-making.

CPSA and the Public Hospital Authority (PHA) have

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already held several meetings that have resolved nothing, with the CPSA calling two temporary walkouts. The PHA claims that there are budget constraints, while the CPSA counterclaims that the money has not been wisely allocated.

In the face of the overwhelming strike vote the CPSA has agreed to hold more meetings with PHA negotiators beginning October 18.

AFL-CIO headquarters staff vote for strike

Janitors, secretaries and accountants who work at the Washington D.C. offices of the AFL-CIO union federation have voted unanimously to strike after rejecting a contract proposal. The Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) said the strike vote came after the AFL-CIO imposed a contract workers had previously unanimously rejected. The offer reportedly included cuts in sick time, no pay raises and the weakening of protection against layoffs. In addition the AFL-CIO wants to revoke workers' right to bargain over hours and working conditions.

In a statement posted on its web site, OPEIU wrote, “If a company tried to force a contract like this, we believe that the AFL-CIO would deplore the company as anti-union. If we agree to this contract, we are signaling to every other union out there that they should accept those terms from their employers.”

OPEIU has not set a strike date. Instead it has planned several lunch-time marches.

Tentative agreement in Rhode Island school bus strike as questions remain over fate of pensions

A tentative agreement was announced October 12 in the third week of a strike by school bus drivers for Providence, Rhode Island schools. The main issue involved a struggle over pensions between Teamsters Local 251 and First Student, which contracts for transporting students to and from school.

First Student had been insisting on offering only an inferior 401(k) pension plan, while the Teamsters have been insisting on a defined-benefit plan, which provides fixed payments by the company. The 401(k) plan is not backed up with a guarantee by the federal government and amounts to little more than fleecing workers of their savings.

First Student has refused to contribute to the Teamsters-administered pension plan, which is underfunded by $3.6 billion and is considered in critical status by the federal government. Currently, some one-third of Providence bus drivers participate in the 401(k) plan offered by First Student, but the Teamsters claim they have been forced to go to court several times to get the company to properly fund the plan.

The tentative agreement came after Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza issued an ultimatum that the city would break its contract with First Student and go with a different company, a move that could also result in the replacement of striking bus drivers. There are conflicting reports of the terms of the final deal. The Teamsters are claiming the tentative agreement calls for a defined benefit plan while First Student says the result of the mediated negotiations was a 401(k) plan.

Quebec government workers renew job action

In the latest of a series of similar actions in recent months, provincial government workers employed by Revenue Quebec were off the job last weekend ahead of coordinated 30-minute demonstrations across the province this week.

The 4,600 members of Syndicat de professionnelles et professionnels du gouvernement du Québec (SPGQ), including accountants, analysts and managers, have been working without a contract since March 2015. Union negotiators have said they are fighting for wage parity between workers at the Agence du revenu du Québec and their federal counterparts ,but since there has been no progress on that issue the two sides remain far apart on an agreement.

The union has so far limited actions to protests and partial strikes with those taking place only on weekends, which the union claims is when computer maintenance and restaurant spot-checks are carried out.

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