

Dominican health workers strike, Chilean copper miners protest subcontracting

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 November 2019

Latin America

Dominican Republic: One-day health workers strike over pay and other demands

Nurses, bioanalysts, and other health sector workers held a 24-hour strike on November 7 to press for better wages and other demands. The action was called by a number of health sector unions, including the National Health Sector Coordinator and National Nursing Syndicate.

In addition to a 100 percent raise in salaries and retirement payments, the workers' demands include the investment of 5 percent of gross national product in the health sector and a program for construction of housing for health sector workers.

Union officials claim that only doctors' demands are heard by the "elitist and discriminatory" government while other specialists and support staff are ignored. They say that if the demands are not met the strikes will continue.

Hundreds of sugar workers—cane cultivators, harvester, factory workers, tillage workers and others—at the Albion Sugar Estate in northeastern Guyana struck and protested November 8 to demand a pay raise. The workers have not had a raise since 2014 as the cost of living inexorably rises. Neither do they receive holiday pay or production bonuses.

Another complaint is the woeful state of disrepair of the factory and machinery, meaning that workers cannot work when a breakdown occurs. Some workers have taken to fishing to provide food for their families; others have left the area. One result is that businesses that served the sugar workers have suffered, with some having to close down.

The *Guyana Times* recounted that a regional representative of the General Agricultural Workers Union, which reports said supported the walkout and protest—though they did not say if it led or called the actions—criticized management as "overbearing" and said that the actions would increase, though the rep "noted that any further action will be a decision made by the union."

Trinidadian teachers protest again to restart salary talks

Chilean copper miners announce strike against labor insecurity

Chile's Copper Workers Confederation (CTC) announced on November 8 that it had called for a strike November 12. The walkout was called to protest subcontracted labor, which has impacted working class living standards and workers' rights.

A CTC communiqué denounced subcontracting as "one of the worst forms of labor instability" and vowed to "combat the deep inequalities and discrimination that are produced in our labor sector and nation." It also called for a halt to the government's pro-business legislative agenda and to "grave violations of human rights." It demanded a minimum monthly income of 500,000 pesos (US\$667) for all subcontract workers, and a constituent assembly to create a new Constitution.

Guyanese sugar workers protest for wage hike

Teachers in the Trinidad and Tobago United Teachers Association (TTUTA) marched down the streets of San Fernando November 5 to once again voice their demand for the reopening of salary talks with the Education Minister and Chief Personnel Officer (CPO). The teachers held a similar protest on October 1 in Port-of-Spain, which brought no result.

Called the "red army" by local media due to their red shirts, the teachers marched, chanted and carried signs proclaiming that they love their jobs, but that love cannot pay their bills. The teachers denounced the disrespect and neglect that the past and present CPOs have shown them.

Despite the rising cost of living over the last five years, teachers' pay has not changed since 2014. In addition to wages, teachers also have issues with policies relating to upgrades, appointments, health, safety and other working conditions.

The newly elected TTUTA president, Antonia De Freitas, called the protest, and now says that the next step will be to meet with the education minister and CPO to negotiate the changes.

Striking Jamaican academic tech staff “temporarily” return to work

The University of Technology Jamaica Academic Staff Union (UTASU), following a meeting with officials of the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) and Ministry of Labour and Social Security, announced November 5 that it was “temporarily” ending the strike it began October 25 over longstanding issues regarding overdue pay.

UTASU and UTech have been in talks for months, with UTech administration promising that it would pay the overdue 2018-2019 salaries in installments, with the first being in July, which was paid. However, the second tranche, which was to be delivered in October, failed to materialize, bringing on the strike.

UTech claimed that it had not received money from the government. The Acting Education Minister, Karl Samuda, offered to pay half of the retroactive pay for October, an offer that was rejected as incomplete and containing no commitment for the follow-up installments. With pressure on the union due to upcoming exams, UTASU agreed to call staff back to work. The ostensibly temporary return to work will coincide with meetings scheduled to begin November 11.

Samuda also said that if the matter cannot be resolved at the meetings, it will have to be referred to the Industrial Disputes Tribunal.

Bahamian social security workers pass strike vote over working conditions, pay, promotions

Workers at the Bahamas’ National Insurance Board (NIB) social security agency voted overwhelmingly last week to strike over a variety of issues. The latest count on November 4 showed 256 votes in favor of a walkout. All the islands’ votes had not been counted, but since the Union of Public Officers (UPO) membership is 406, that is already enough to validate the strike vote.

The workers and NIB management have been at odds since at least mid-2017, when workers complained of delays and nonpayment of wages and bonuses. They have held protests, sickouts, one-day walkouts and work-to-rule, but management has stonewalled. The contract expired in December 2018 and there has been no movement on reaching an agreement.

A previous overwhelming strike vote was shot down on a technicality by the labor minister, causing more protests. The union and management are back in negotiations, and the union shows little willingness to act on the strike vote, as shown by the statement by UPO president Ghion Roach to tribune242.com. “The minister has agreed to restart negotiations this week, we will see where it goes from there. [If] things go left, we’ll be back at [protesting] again, but we will work with management for now.”

In addition to wages and working conditions, workers complain of unfair promotion procedures, and have accused management of favoritism and hiring outside any bidding process. Last week, the wife of the chairman of the governing Free National Movement was hired, without workers’ knowledge or input, as a consultant at a rate higher than the position’s union pay scale.

United States

Strike by Decatur, Illinois teaching assistants suspended after three days without contract

The union representing 275 teaching assistants for the Decatur, Illinois public schools suspended their strike November 5 after three days on the picket line without getting a contract. The Decatur Federation of Teaching Assistants (DFTA) and the Board of Education are now awaiting a return to negotiations directed by a federal mediator.

The teaching assistants are opposed to a contract offer that will increase the cost of family healthcare coverage by two and a half times, among other issues. Workers believe the hard line on healthcare taken by the Decatur Board of Education is to isolate the teaching assistants and impose concessions ahead of negotiations with other teachers in the system.

The bargaining unit includes hearing interpreters, licensed practical nurses, hearing-vision technicians and teaching assistants. The strike caused 500 special-needs students to remain home.

On the last day of the strike, a raucous crowd, which included parents and other supporters, turned out. Speaking to the *Herald & Review*, one parent said of the teaching assistants, “They are my son’s legs and arms...”

Canada

As Vancouver Metro Transit dispute continues, Seabus sailings canceled

Management for Vancouver Metro Transit announced Monday that sailings of the SeaBus passenger ferry were being canceled Monday on the Remembrance Day holiday.

The cancellations come as an overtime ban by maintenance workers nears the end of its second week. Management said that it had to cancel the sailings due to lack of qualified engineers.

Some 5,000 transit workers are in negotiations with Coast Mountain Bus Company (CMBC) over a new contract. So far the job action has not impacted bus service. A significant difference remains between the Unifor union and management over the size of proposed wage increases. CMBC management has said the union’s proposal would cost \$680 million over 10 years. Its proposal, which it called “fiscally responsible,” would only cost \$71 million.

The union has said that the overtime ban may soon be expanded to include bus drivers. That would reportedly impact 10 to 15 percent of service across the region.



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