Renewed protests in Chile; Michigan delivery drivers strike over healthcare

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 March 2020

Latin America

Renewed protests in Chile over inequality, repression

Protesters in Chile continue to demonstrate against inequality in education, wages, pensions, and the cost of living, as well as attacks on human rights. On March 6, at least three young people suffered ocular trauma as a result of tear gas pellets fired at them by Carabineros, Chile's national police, at a protest in Santiago's Italia Plaza.

In street confrontations, protesters burned some police cars, and pitched battles involving special forces, Molotov cocktails, laser rays and tear gas broke out. The injured students were part of a protest by thousands against President Sebastián Piñera's right-wing policies of inequality, austerity and repression.

At the plaza, newly renamed the "Dignity Plaza," protesters were entertained by musicians including Illapu, exponents of nueva canción who left Chile in 1981 in the face of persecution of left-wing artists but returned in 1988.

Despite Piñera's attempts to defuse the protests by calling for an April 26 referendum on the Pinochet-era constitution and a "grand accord in defense of democracy," popular anger remains widespread and demonstrators are calling for solutions now to the high cost of living, miserable pensions and other social maladies.

Adding to the sense of urgency is the fact that March is not only the month of International Women's Day (March 8) strikes and mobilizations, but of the thirtieth anniversary of the official end of Pinochet's dictatorship on March 11.

State workers in Argentine province protest pay delays

In Rawson, capital of southern Argentina's Chubut province, members of the Road Workers Syndicate of Chubut (Sitravich) tried to enter the House of Government March 5. The attempt, which was prevented by provincial police, was part of protest actions—including roadblocks, temporary strikes and permanent assembly—to demand the payment of overdue wages.

According to Sitravich head Carlos Milani, the amount owed to the workers is equal to over 90 percent of wages for January. Members of the Association of State Workers of Chubut, who had begun a 72-hour strike on March 5, were also at the building protesting. In recent days, teachers, judicial, sanitation and other state workers have gone on strike, protested and camped out over unpaid or insufficient wages.

Meanwhile, provincial governor Mariano Arcioni was able to find the funds to pay legislators, further inflaming workers' indignation. The Labor Secretary of Chubut called for the Chubut Education Workers Association (Atech) to suspend their strike—which had originally been called for 72 hours beginning March 4—and attend arbitration meetings. Atech rejected the order, stating that the government would be both "judge and party" to the conflict.

Teacher unions stage limited strikes across Argentina over wages, conditions

In at least twelve of Argentina's twenty-three provinces, teachers protested and held strikes of from 24 to 72 hours last week. Most of the temporary walkouts were over salaries, but issues of retirement, working conditions and infrastructure were also at the forefront.

In some cases, parents and students participated in protest actions as well. In the southern province of Santa Cruz, the Santa Cruz Teachers Association (Adosac) rejected a 2,000-peso (US$114) wage hike offer by the government of Alicia Kirchner, sister of the former president, and voted to strike for 48 hours.

The governor reacted by firing recently hired teachers who supported the strike. Adosac denounced the "brutal attack on the right to strike, union autonomy and labor laws" and demanded the reopening of parity talks to continue negotiations for 2020 guidelines.

The Middle and Superior Teaching Instructors Association (Ademys) in the City of Buenos Aires called a 24-hour strike against the governor's salary proposal and declared solidarity with the Santa Cruz educators. An Ademys statement denounced the firings of hundreds of teachers involved in industrial actions.

Lack of maintenance was added to salary complaints in Neuquén province, where Neuquén Education Workers Association (Aten) teachers were joined by parents and students in protests against the deplorable state of facilities.

The teachers refused to teach for 48 hours beginning March 2, pointing to falling roofs, undrinkable water and more than 50 provincial schools that did not meet minimum requirements for operation. Teachers at both private and public schools rejected the Santa Fe government's 10 percent salary raise offer and voted for a strike March 11 and 12, to be followed by an assembly on the 13th.

Belizean stevedores protest shift of raw sugar export terminal

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Stevedores at the Port of Belize staged a protest March 2 to voice their concerns over plans by sugar millers ASR/BSI and Santander to shift the loading and export of raw sugar to the Port of Big Creek in the country's south. More than 150 protesters attended.

The stevedores were joined by mechanics, warehouse, operations and office staff, who share their anxiety that the move would result in job losses for at least forty dockworkers and pay cuts for the remaining 110.

Following the planned consolidation of ASR/BSI and Santander, plans have been afoot to make the sugar-loading process, which the firm calls "antiquated," more efficient and cheaper. According to the Christian Workers Union (CWU), which represents the stevedores, the economic impact would be about 2 million Belizean dollars (US$992,404), which would have a devastating impact on the port area working-class community. Those who would retain their jobs could see a loss of about 40 percent of their incomes.

The last time the CWU and sugar firms signed a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) was in 2004. The union asserts that it has tried to get a new CBA drawn up with management to no avail. It is calling for a compensation arrangement for workers who will be made redundant.

Initial talks with management made no headway, and on March 4 the stevedores struck and prevented the unloading of a ship at the pier head. The Commissioner of Police hinted at resorting to the Essential Services Act and police were deployed to the port. Truckers supported the strike, while management attempted to hire scabs to unload the cargo.

By March 6, the CWU called its members back to work, saying that the parties had agreed to discuss the issues for three weeks, but that the strike option still existed if a resolution was not reached by then.

The millers said that for the time being they would not alter their operations, and that, according to the channel5belize website, "any evaluation of alternatives will be thorough and will consider all variables such as potential savings to the industry, including cane farmers and faster loading rates through a deep water port."

Mexican university workers strike after three months of fruitless salary talks

Workers in the Chapingo Autonomous University Workers Syndicate (STUACH) in Texcoco in the state of Mexico began a strike in the early morning of March 7 following three months of futile negotiations.

The talks failed to achieve the union's demands of a 3.4 percent wage ceiling increase and a 1.8 percent bonus, which would translate to 12,500 pesos (US$593) in food vouchers, a far cry from the rectory's offer of 2,400 pesos (US$114).

The vote for the strike was 1,187 in favor, 196 against, 61 abstentions and 344 null. STUACH does not include academic and administrative workers, and it did not attempt to block student access to those personnel.

United States

Michigan delivery drivers strike over healthcare

Over 120 drivers, members of Teamsters Local 337, went out on strike over unfair labor practices this weekend at the Sygma Network distribution facility in Monroe, Michigan just north of Toledo, Ohio. They deliver food and supplies for Sygma Network whose customers are chain restaurants and institutions and include Wendy's, Arby's, and Panera Bread.

The strike has already had an impact, with shortages reported and at least one restaurant forced to close. The Sygma employees had recently voted to join the Teamsters in January 2019 and have since been unable to reach an agreement for a first contract with the company.

Sygma is a subsidiary of multinational Sysco foods, which is one of the largest food service and supply companies in the world. The company has over 4,000 employees in the US with $6.7 billion in revenue. Sygma's parent company, Sysco, prepares and delivers food for restaurants, hotels, hospitals, and other institutions. It has over 69,000 employees and states that it pulled in $60 billion in earnings in the last fiscal year.

The strike has been called, not on contract issues but over unfair labor practices related to the random drug testing by management that was allegedly unfairly targeting union stewards, as well as a company ban on employees wearing stickers with union slogans.

Teamsters Local 337 President Todd Lince told local media that there had been several negotiation sessions and that a major sticking point had been health insurance, with reports that some workers pay over $200 in weekly premiums.

With the Michigan presidential primary held this week, candidates postured as supporters of the Sygma workers. On Sunday Democratic presidential frontrunner Joe Biden sent Delaware Senator Tom Carper to visit the picket line at Sygma on his behalf. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders sent words of support to the Sygma workers as well.

The use of unfair labor practice strikes is a well-tested strategy by the trade union bureaucracy aimed at diverting the energy of strikers while the union works to impose a sellout. Significantly, the Teamsters union has not issued a list of demands and has made no appeal for broader support from workers in the region.

Teamsters ram through sellout at University of Minnesota

In another contract struggle involving the Teamsters, involving several hundred food service workers with Teamsters Local 320 at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, the union forced through a vote on a sellout contract March 2.

The deal contained a paltry 2.25 percent wage increase and limited retroactive pay. It also included a reduction in the duration of the contract from 12 months down to 9 months.

In a sign of growing militancy, Becker County workers in western Minnesota gave unanimous approval in a strike authorization vote held February 15.

The 160 members of Teamster Local 320 are employees of Becker County. The county's last offer for wage raises of 2.25 and 2.5 percent in each year of the agreement was rejected by 88 percent of workers in the vote. Sticking points were health insurance costs, and the demand from full-time workers that part-time workers that work less than 28 hours weekly should receive health insurance.

The workers state that the county has begun to hire more part-time workers as a tactic to reduce their costs.

Canada

Toronto outside workers ratify contract; Inside workers nearing strike or lockout

Five thousand City of Toronto garbage collectors, parks workers and animal control officers voted to accept a new five-year contract last week.

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The workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), accepted language in the new deal that renews protection of full-time workers from layoff or privatization who have fifteen years or more of seniority by December 21, 2024.

City management has held the threat of privatization over the heads of the outside workers ever since a bitter and defeated 2009 six-week strike resulted in the contracting out of garbage collection on the west side of the city in 2011. Subsequent contracts have traded concessions on wages, benefits and working conditions for the tenuous job security provisions that must be renewed with each contract.

The newly ratified agreement cuts medical benefits and provides for an average 1.3 percent per year wage rise over the life of the settlement. With inflation in Ontario at 2.1 percent workers will experience a real wage cut.

In Toronto itself, where home prices continue to skyrocket, property taxes were raised this year by 4.24 percent. Paramedics in the union local, who are deemed an essential service, will have their outstanding wage and benefits issues sent to arbitration. About 20,000 city inside workers, also organized by CUPE, remain without a contract. They move into a possible legal strike or lockout position on March 14.

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