

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 November 2012

Uruguayan workers march, hold 4-hour strike to demand political changes

Several thousand workers marched through downtown Montevideo, Uruguay under the slogan “For deeper changes” on November 22. The protest was coordinated with a 4-hour general strike called by the Intersyndical Plenary-National Workers Convention (PIT-CNT) federation.

The march ended in front of the presidential building, where PIT-CNT officials called for a permanent working group composed of union delegates and the cabinet “to advance in the change of the productive matrix.” The PIT-CNT is part of the Broad Front (FA) coalition of President Jose Mujica, who took office in March 2010 on a platform of reforms to improve the lives of Uruguay’s working class and poor.

Since the promised improvements have not come to pass, PIT-CNT bureaucrats are under pressure to demand that Mujica “concretize changes” such as a greater presence of the state in certain productive sectors, limits on profits and an increase in benefits and social programs for workers. They have called a number of limited actions, beginning with a 4-hour strike in August 2010.

Argentina: One-day general strike followed by teachers’ and oil workers’ stoppages

Last week witnessed strikes and mobilizations across Argentina. In all of the strikes, wage demands in response to the nation’s galloping inflation rate figured prominently.

On November 20, the CGT and CTA labor federations held a one-day general strike to protest policies of the national government of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. The actions were joined by the Argentine Agricultural Federation or FAA, a grouping of small and medium-sized agricultural and livestock producers.

Marches and barricades blocked highways, bridges, railroads and other means of transportation, paralyzing Buenos Aires and 20 other cities. The main demands of the protesters were the end of a tax hike on higher-earning workers, an increase in the minimum wage, raising of retirement payments, an end to caps on child allowances and the enactment of policies to battle the effects of inflation,

which is over 30 percent this year.

Teachers in the province of Buenos Aires struck November 22 and 23 to demand the reopening of parity talks, payment of back wages, improvements in infrastructure and the end of unjustified firings, among other issues.

The Buenos Aires Educators Union Front, consisting of five education workers unions, claimed 97 percent participation in the two-day action. Roberto Baradel, secretary general of the SUTEBA union, warned that if there is no solution to the demands, the conflict “is going to deepen.”

On November 22, oil workers in three provinces struck for 24 hours over salary demands. Production in Neuquen, La Pampa and Rio Negro provinces was halted after an assembly of over 15,000 workers voted for the action. The Private Gas and Petroleum Union wants differential pay for workers in “unfavorable zones,” similar to the current system in Chubut province to the south.

Union spokesmen have warned that if their demands are not met, they will call a 48-hour strike.

In the agroexport area of Rosario, workers in four soy oil processing plants returned to work November 23 after a strike over salaries. The strike was called to demand parity in wages and conditions for security personnel with those of processing plant workers.

Chilean home center workers strike for wage raises

Workers for the Chilean home improvement center chain Sodimac walked off the job on November 13. They returned to work November 19 after an announcement that the company and their union, Nocesur, had signed an agreement. The 1,800 workers had walked out after negotiators reached an impasse over salary and bonus issues.

Sodimac, owned by the retail giant Falabella, has dozens of outlets in Chile, Argentina, Colombia and Peru. Sodimac employs about 18,000 workers. This was the first time Sodimac workers have struck. Workers held protests and pickets at a number of Sodimac and Falabella outlets.

According to the agreement, the workers will receive a pay increase, an attendance bonus and a 230,000-peso (US\$480) bonus for ending the conflict.

Peruvian teachers strike for 48 hours against educational reform law

The Unitary Educational Workers Syndicate of Peru (Sutep) called a two-day strike November 21 and 22 to protest the Educational Reform Law being discussed in the Congress.

Sutep claims that the law contains unconstitutional features and that it would erode teachers' rights and earnings. The union had submitted its own proposal to the congressional Commission on Education, which, according to a Sutep communiqué, "has not taken our proposal into account."

Adherence to the strike was reported as partial in Cusco, where some 800 teachers marched downtown, and Huancayo, which saw a mobilization by about 300 teachers accompanied by 100 parents. Satipo province reported 40 percent participation.

In Chanchamayo province, teachers decided to hold a vigil and demonstration after school hours so as not to affect classes.

Panama Canal expansion workers strike over safety issues

Following the death of one of their comrades and the injuries of four others in an accident, workers on the Panama Canal expansion project downed their tools November 22. The workers demanded workplace safety measures and an investigation into the incident by the Labor Ministry. Workers have struck before—most recently last April—to demand increased safety following a fatal accident.

The expansion project, run by the United Group for the Canal (GUPC) consortium, aims to double container traffic and accommodate larger vessels. Its completion, originally planned for the Canal's centenary in 2014, has been pushed forward to 2015.

The workers' union, Suntracs, suspended the strike after two days and called the workers back.

One day strike causes delays at California's Port of Oakland

Hundreds of port and airport workers blocked the entrance to the Port of Oakland, California, November 19 to protest stalled contract talks. The one-day strike caused widespread delays as longshoremen, truck drivers and other port workers refused to cross picket lines of striking electricians, clerical workers, janitors and security personnel.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 and the Port of Oakland, which operates both the airport and sea port, were scheduled to resume bargaining after Oakland's Democratic mayor Jean Quan stepped in to

call for renewed talks and an ending of the strike.

SEIU officials and the Port negotiators agreed on a tentative pact back in March, but rank and file workers voted down the proposal. Current talks failed as the two sides could not come to an agreement over Port demands that janitors and maintenance workers pay to their retirement funds and other issues governing pay and benefits.

The SEIU says Port management unilaterally implemented some changes and has refused to provide financial information to back their demands for concessions. Local 1021 members have been without a contract for 16 months.

British Columbia community health workers walk out

Forty community health workers at Richmond Health Services in Vancouver, British Columbia, walked off the job last Friday as part of ongoing job action begun earlier this month in their fight for a new collective agreement.

Most of the strikers, who are some of the lowest paid workers in the health care field, are members of the Health Employees Union (HEU). Along with 14,000 other workers organized within the umbrella of the Community Bargaining Association (CBA), they have been working without a contract since January. They are facing intransigent bargaining from the Health Employers Association of BC (HEABC), which is insisting on a wage freeze in a new contract.

British Columbia Health Professionals issue strike notice

Over 500 union members in the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association (HSPBA) in the province of British Columbia issued a 72-hour strike notice last Friday after negotiators for the HEABC failed to attend scheduled talks.

While it is not clear if or when a strike might take place, health professionals delivered a strike vote of 90 percent to their union earlier this month. Key issues in their dispute include staffing levels and wages, with their union saying they are paid up to \$12 an hour less than their counterparts in other provinces.

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