

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 October 2015

Strike by Chilean kindergarten workers over budget, contract issues

Citing nonfulfillment of the terms of their contract by the Chilean government, representatives of workers in the National Kindergarten Board (Junji) began a three-day national strike on October 21. The Junji workers complained of overwork and extended hours, non-replacement of licensed medical personnel, mistreatment of workers and lack of transparency regarding the use of resources, especially in the upgrading of workers into higher salary levels.

Julia Requena Castillo, president of the union Ajunji, told reporters, “We made a call as much to the government as to the parliamentarians to revise the preliminary institutional budget and assign additional exclusive resources for the rise in pay scales” for around 5,000 workers who had not gotten the raises “despite fulfilling the requirements.”

Ajunji and Junji negotiated during the strike, and on October 22, Junji vice president Desiree Lopez announced, “We celebrate the end of the paralysis,” and declared that the parties had reached an accord, including the upgrading of the 5,000 workers this year. For 2016, 1,700 million pesos [US\$2,476,000] are “contemplated in the Budget Law” for raising pay scales,” she added.

Chilean mine supervisors end strike over wage and benefits issues

Supervisors at the Radomiro Tomic mine in northern Chile voted on October 20 to end the strike that they began on October 8 over proposals by management to impose two-tier wage and benefits policies. Of the 141 supervisors, 70 percent voted to accept the latest offer by Codelco, the state enterprise that operates the mine. A report in *eleconomista.com.mx* said, “The terms of the contract, which will last 24 months, contemplate the payment of a bonus for the end of the conflict of some 4,367 dollars.”

A Codelco press release stated that it had committed to “the formation of a labor commission to tackle themes of health and costs, permitting also the deduction for each associate of one day per month of the 12 days that the legal strike lasted.”

Taxi drivers in Brazil and Colombia protest against Uber

Protests against the Uber ride-sharing service took place last week in Brazil and Colombia. Taxi drivers worldwide have protested Uber and similar services, which contract drivers of private vehicles and are not subject to the same laws, restrictions and taxes as traditional taxicabs.

In Rio de Janeiro, taxi drivers gathered at the Santos Dumont Airport October 20 and drove down a main expressway through the city, slowing traffic. The cabbies’ action was a protest against an October 15 ruling by a judge overturning a city ordinance passed in August banning Uber and other similar services.

The ruling declared that the ordinance could not ban “a legal economic activity, open to private initiative and free competition.” The judge also said that taxi drivers who interfere with Uber drivers could face fines of up to 50,000 reais (US\$13,000).

In Colombia, taxi drivers protested at key spots around the capital Bogota October 21 and slowly drove to the Ministry of Information to demonstrate. Over 200 police were deployed throughout the city to prevent blockades, but no incidents were reported.

Puerto Rican state electrical workers strike, protest labor “reforms” and restructuring

Thousands of Puerto Rican workers demonstrated October 20 against a government plan to restructure the publicly-owned Electrical Energy Authority (AEE). The protest was called by the Utier electrical and irrigation workers union—which also held a one-day strike—but other labor organizations joined the action as

well.

Protesters marched to the Condado Plaza Hilton Hotel, where the Chamber of Commerce was hosting a presentation by Lisa Donahue, managing director of “turnaround” consultants AlixPartners entitled “The AEE as a Model of Government Restructuring.” Donahue’s proposals included privatization, layoffs and, as Utier president Angel Figueroa Jaramillo put it, “the dismantling of century-old labor rights.”

A heavy police presence guarded the principal entries to the hotel, but no confrontations or damages to property were reported.

Jamaican tanker truck drivers strike against signing of wage agreement

Drivers of petroleum tanker trucks in Jamaica stopped work on October 20 to protest the signing of an agreement between their union, the National Workers’ Union (NWU) and the Petroleum Haulage Contractors Association last August.

“The drivers claim they had no knowledge of the signing of the agreement in August and disagree with aspects of it,” reported rjnnews.com.

The tanker drivers have formed a new group, the Petroleum Drivers Association, but the haulage contractors have refused to recognize it. NWU secretary general Granville Valentine insists that the agreement is above board.

Texas aluminum refinery workers hold rally to mark one year of lockout

Hundreds of locked-out workers at the Sherwin Alumina plant near Corpus Christi, Texas rallied October 18 to protest the year-long lockout over cuts in overtime, retiree health care benefits, increased premiums, a pay reduction and the slashing of pensions for new workers. Sherwin, owned by Swiss commodities Glencore, first locked out workers on October 10, 2014. The following day, replacement workers were brought in and they have remained throughout the lockout.

The United Steel Workers, who represent the 450 locked-out workers, isolated the strike and sought to build up illusions in an appeal to the National Labor Relations Board charging the lockout is illegal. But on October 5, the NLRB issued a ruling that Sherwin did not violate labor law and at no time were the two sides

at an impasse.

Sherwin insists that it will only end the lockout when a new labor agreement is in place. There were negotiations leading up to the one-year anniversary of the lockout, but no talks are taking place at the moment.

Quebec teachers begin job action

Teachers and support staff in the Eastern Township School Board (ETSB) will hold the first strike day of a six-day mandate this week, closing down schools and daycares in the region on Wednesday, October 28.

This action takes place in cooperation with the Common Front of public-sector workers in the province of Quebec, which represents over 400,000 workers. Further strike days are currently scheduled for November 12 and 13 with job actions overlapping with other unions and school boards in the region.

At the same time, progress has been reported in contract negotiations although a number of outstanding issues remain unresolved. These include employer demands to increase the school workweek from 32 to 35 hours and increased student-to-teacher ratios for some grades.

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