

Puerto Rican workers face massive assault, Quebec iron miners set to strike

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 May 2017

Latin America

Puerto Rico to close 179 public schools, attack pensions

Education officials in Puerto Rico announced the closing of 179 public schools last Friday as part of the savage austerity measures being outlined after the US territory declared bankruptcy last week. The closures, which will force the relocation of some 30,000 students, come on top of the closure of some 150 schools between 2010 and 2015.

Rank-and-file teachers, parents and students reacted in shock, particularly because the closings will burden poor students without access to transportation, as well as special education students who make up 30 percent of the student body. “This is a disaster,” Ana Sanchez, mother of an eight-year-old daughter whose new school in San Juan is closing for the second time in two years told ABC. “This is causing her psychological problems.”

Teachers have been at the forefront of the attack on pensions and services being demanded by Wall Street hedge funds and the government of Gov. Ricardo Rossello, with large delegations of educators taking part in last week’s May Day demonstrations. Puerto Rico’s Association of Teachers, however, is endorsing the school closure plan, with union president Aida Diaz saying the “process has been much more organized and well thought-out and incredibly backed up with data and information.”

Argentine professors strike for salary raise

University instructors at Conadu Historica have struck for 16 days, off and on, since salary talks began in early March. A 120-hour strike is set to begin May 8, and a march from the Congress to the Education Ministry, and from there to the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, is planned for May 16.

On May 4, the sixth meeting between the government of Argentina and the Conadu Historica university professors’ confederation ended with no agreement on salaries. Following the meeting, the University Policy Secretariat announced its unilateral decision to add a four percent raise—retroactive to March—to their pay, to be followed by three installments eventually reaching 20 percent this year.

The basic salary for professors is 7,427 pesos (US\$483); the four percent raise would bring it to 7,724 pesos (US\$502). Professors rejected the increase, since it would not keep up with the rate of inflation, which was 40 percent in 2016. They are demanding a raise of 35 percent, equal to March’s official inflation rate.

One-day “warning strike” by Chilean health workers over

job

security

Workers for Chile’s National Health Fund (Fonasa) held a 24-hour work stoppage May 5 to press their demands for better working conditions. The workers are members of the Anaff and Anptuf unions. Negotiations between the unions and Budget Department (Dipres) representatives have been held for over six months without any progress. The unions called workers back to work on May 8, saying they would remain in a “state of alert.”

Guyanese sugar workers continue protests against estate closures

Despite pouring rain, cane sugar industry workers in Canje, Guyana picketed the Rose Hall Estate May 2 to protest planned closures of its sugar operations and other workplaces. The shuttering of Rose Hall, the main local employer, will have devastating consequences for workers and their communities.

Protests have taken place regularly at sugar estates, operated by state-run GuySuCo, following the announcement last year that the Wales Estate would be closed. Since then, President David Granger has said all but three sugar estates are targeted. At a May Day event the day before, Granger claimed the shutdowns only involved “consolidation,” not closure, of the industry.

Over 1,000 workers lost their jobs due to the closure of the Wales Estate, causing widespread economic distress in the West Bank of Demerara, site of its operations. Rose Hall currently employs about 2,400 in field and factory jobs.

Costa Rican social security workers strike over housing incentive

Workers at several medical centers in Costa Rica’s Zona Sur (Southern Zone) walked off the job May 2 over the housing policies of the nation’s social security agency (CCSS). Workers complain there is no consistent policy of granting housing incentives to those assigned to the region, which is less developed than others in Costa Rica, and that personnel sent to the rural areas have difficulty obtaining lodging.

Workers say they receive a bonus upon arrival, which is later withdrawn without an explanation of the factors and procedures determining the policy. They demand a study and establishment of a consistent process governing the incentive.

May Day protests in the Dominican Republic

Workers in the Dominican Republic commemorated May 1, International Workers Day, with protests denouncing poor wages and working conditions. In the capital Santo Domingo, protesters

gathered at Parque Independencia. The minimum monthly wage in the Dominican Republic is between 7,849 and 12,872 pesos (US\$165 and \$270), depending on the size of the company.

Mexican teachers protest insecure jobs

Teachers at the National Technical Professional Education College (Conalep) in Morelos, Mexico marched through the city's streets May 6 to press their demands for the "basification," i.e. upgrading to permanent status, of over 230 teachers, as well as the regularization of payments to the State Workers Security and Social Services Institute, ISSSTE.

Payments to ISSSTE are part of the collective bargaining agreement signed between Conalep and the teachers' union. The union says it will call a strike May 17 if the issues are not addressed.

The United States

New York workers strike beer distributor over pensions and wages

Delivery drivers for the Clare Rose beer distributor in Long Island, New York are entering their third week on strike over the company's demand to gut pensions and cut wages. The strike began April 23 after three months of negotiations when the company proposed to end contributions to the defined benefit pension plan and substitute it with an inferior 401(k) plan.

Under the older pension, the company contributed about \$10,000 per employee per year. The new plan will reduce that contribution to \$1,200 and the amount would likely fluctuate according to company whim. A year ago, Teamsters Local 812 agreed to allow the company to convert a portion of its drivers away from the driver-salesmen model, which involved sales incentives, to simple delivery workers. In the current negotiations, Clare Rose wants to convert all remaining drivers to be sole delivery drivers.

The company built a massive new facility in 2010 and received significant tax breaks. The company has hired scab replacement workers and is using management personnel to break the current strike.

Spectrum telecom workers still on strike

Seventeen-hundred telecom workers in New York and New Jersey remain on strike against Spectrum, formerly known as Time Warner cable TV. The striking field technicians, warehouse workers and engineering department workers—members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3—are opposing company demands to shift the cost of health care and pensions onto workers, as well as the elimination of funding for union provided benefits.

The IBEW was forced to call the strike on March 28 after forcing workers to labor without a contract for almost four years. Having betrayed last summer's strike by 39,000 Verizon workers, the IBEW and Communications Workers of America (CWA) are once again isolating the Spectrum struggle and blocking a common strike with tens of thousands of AT&T wireless and wireline workers who are facing company demands for similar health care and pension concessions.

Canada

Quebec iron miners to strike

Over 2,000 workers at ArcelorMittal's Mont-Wright iron ore mine in northern Quebec could be on strike this week after the United Steelworkers union (Syndicat des Métallistes/ USW in Quebec) issued a strike notice last week.

Workers at the open pit mine in Fermont and Port-Cartier, Quebec voted nearly unanimously for strike action in rejecting the employer's final offer. Among the concessions miners are fighting are employer demands for a two-tiered pension system that would adversely impact new hires. The union says it also wants some currently outsourced work to be returned.

The last contract with the world's largest steelmaker, ArcelorMittal, expired at the end of March but a company spokesman says they are confident a deal can be reached in ongoing negotiations. In 2015, the USW imposed sweeping concessions on ArcelorMittal workers in the US after blocking a common strike against AM and the other steel giants.

Toronto zoo facing strike action

Up to 500 staff at the Toronto Zoo could be on strike or locked out later this week if an impasse over job security and contracting out is not resolved. The workers, who include zookeepers, scientists and gardeners, belong to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Despite near record attendance in recent months, the zoo's management, which includes four city councilors, has said that union wage demands are unaffordable. They have also said they are prepared to use non-union staff to keep the facility open in the event of a work stoppage.

The union says management is trying to eliminate job security language from a new contract to contract out more work to the private sector, which will turn the zoo into a "second-rate amusement park".

Toronto confectionery workers on strike

360 workers employed at Nestlé Canada's manufacturing plant in Toronto's west end went on strike last week after contract talks broke down following the expiration of their last contract at the end of April. The workers, who produce chocolate bars and other confections, belong to the Unifor. Union negotiators say they are fighting against the increased use of part-time employees who are essentially doing full time work but are being paid far less than full-timers. In addition to improvements in job classifications the union says it is seeking wage and benefit increases.

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