

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 March 2012

Two-day strike by Argentinean teachers followed by call for national strike

Teachers in 6 of Argentina's 23 provinces as well as the federal capital struck on February 28 and 29 over the continued deadlock regarding salaries. The new school year was delayed as teachers stayed away from their classrooms in Buenos Aires, Chaco, Córdoba, Entre Ríos, Misiones, Santa Fé and Tucuman. In Mendoza, a last-minute agreement was signed and teachers went to work.

Some 3 million students were affected. Adherence to the action was near total among public school teachers. Private school teachers participated as well, but at a lower rate, about 70 percent.

The various teachers unions are grouped in the Frente Gremial, itself affiliated with the CGT federation headed by truckers union boss Hugo Moyano. Parity talks have been going on with government bargainers without result. The teachers unions are demanding a 28 percent raise to 3,100 pesos (US\$712) while government offers have not gone beyond 21 percent, to 2,800 pesos (US\$645).

The teachers' demands reflect the deterioration of buying power due to soaring inflation. Argentina's official inflation rate for January was 9.7 percent, but according to nasdaq.com, "Most economists peg the annual inflation rate at well over 20 percent, more than doubling the government's official—but widely discredited—figures."

Education minister Alberto Sileoni, denouncing the strike as "extreme" and "out of line with the reality of the country," threatened to dock the pay of the strikers. He claimed that "some teachers would strike even if they were earning 10,000 pesos a month," while President Kirchner told legislators that teachers "are working four hours a day and enjoying three months of vacation" and accused them of being "stuck in another country's logic."

Ongoing talks have failed to break the stalemate. The Frente Gremial, with the backing of the CGT, has called for a national teachers strike to begin March 6.

Mexican university workers end two-week strike

On February 29, members of the Antonio Narro Autonomous Agrarian University Workers Syndicate (SUTUAAAN) in the city of Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico voted in assembly to end their strike

begun February 15. The vote was 589 in favor, 13 against and 23 abstentions. Nonetheless, according to *Zócalo*, the atmosphere at the 3-hour assembly was "heated," with opinions at the open microphone being "supported with applause or rejected with shouts."

The vote ratified acceptance of the university's offer of a 3.8 percent raise, a 4,000 peso (US\$313) family aid bonus and extension of credits to those enrolled in the IMSS health care fund.

The assembly also agreed to the terms of a contract from October 2011 that covers basic pay scales, promotions, reategorizations, payments from the INFONATIV mortgage agency and seniority benefits.

Rector Eladio Cornejo Oviedo claimed that the university received little more than a fifth of requested funding for infrastructure, operations, personnel and other expenses from the state government, thus making the miniscule raise and a drastic 60 percent reduction in the year-end bonus necessary.

SUTUAAAN covers about 970 administrative workers. Another union, SUTAUAAAN, which also went on strike on the 15th, consists of academic workers. SUTAUAAAN did not vote on ending the strike, but has asked the state government to intervene on the issue of pensions. The university's fund currently has a deficit of 25,000,000 pesos (US\$2,000,000). In addition, the union accused the rectory of violations of at least 16 of the contract's 36 clauses.

Trinidad and Tobago: Cement workers strike over retroactive pay

After failing to reach agreement in a five-hour negotiating session at Trinidad and Tobago's Labour Ministry February 22, negotiators for the Oil Workers' Trade Union (OWTU) called for strike action against Trinidad Cement Ltd (TCL) and TCL Packaging Ltd (TPL). Some 600 workers walked off the job on Tuesday, February 28.

At issue is the salary raise for the years 2009-2011. The OWTU calls for a 16 percent raise while the company's proposal is for 7 percent. Another issue is pay and benefits of casual workers.

An OWTU official told reporters that the strike could last for 90 days, but that "the union is flexible." In fact, union president Ancel Roget recently called off an anticipated strike at oil firm Petrotrin over the union's demand for a 75 percent raise for the 2008-2010 period, as opposed to the company's offer of 5 percent. The OWTU accepted a 9 percent raise, an outcome that the union

describes as a victory.

TCL began importing cement March 5 from subsidiaries in Barbados and Jamaica following reports of shortages at hardware stores.

Workers set up a strike camp outside TCL facilities at Claxton Bay and Mayo. Workers and management have traded recriminations, with management accusing strikers of puncturing tires of three managers and “intimidating” scabs. The workers have denounced police use of excessive force during scuffles last Tuesday and Wednesday.

Workers occupy Chicago plant a second time over closure threat

Workers at the former Republic Windows and Doors Goose Island factory near Chicago staged a reoccupation of their plant February 23 after the new management announced they would shutter the facility that was occupied in 2008 when a similar attempt was made to close the factory. When the United Electrical Workers (UE) union returned from negotiations with the current owner, Serious Energy, to inform members that the plant was to be closed immediately, some 70 workers voted to occupy the plant until the company relented. Eleven hours later, Serious Energy management agreed to keep the plant open for another 90 days while a buyer is sought.

In 2008, Republic Windows and Doors received \$25 million in bailout funds for the Federal Government, while at the same time they fired the 250 workers at the Goose Island plant without notice and in violation of the WARN Act which requires 60 days notice before the final termination of workers. The Goose Island workers carried out a 6-day occupation of the plant demanding severance pay and that Bank of America reopen the company’s credit line. Finally, Serious Energy emerged as a buyer for the facility.

Rhode Island disability service workers launch one-day strike in opposition to unilateral cuts

Service workers at Seven Hills Rhode Island in Providence, Rhode Island called a one-day strike in response to the company’s unilateral imposition of a five-percent pay cut along with reduced medical benefits and elimination of the dental plan. Management at Seven Hills Rhode Island declared that the cuts were made necessary by state budget crisis, which reduced the reimbursement paid to Seven Hills.

Seven Hills provides services to people with disabilities. The contract covering members of United Nurses and Allied Professionals expired in June of 2011 and the union and management have failed to come to an agreement.

British Columbia school teachers vote to escalate job action

On Monday March 5, 41,000 British Columbia school teachers begin taking expanded job action by withdrawing all services for three school days. Up to this point, the teachers, who carry an essential service designation, have only been allowed to undertake limited “Phase 1” job action in support of collective bargaining.

Bargaining has essentially collapsed, however, as the provincial government strategy continues its strategy of “zero net bargaining” with its public sectors unions. “Zero net” means that any increase in teacher wages or improvements in working conditions can only be gained by giving up existing conditions in some other area of the collective agreement.

The escalation follows a February 28 BC Labour Relations Board interim order authorizing the BC Teachers’ Federation to expand its job action up to and including a complete withdrawal from all duties including instructional duties for a maximum of three consecutive instructional days after providing notice of not less than two school days. In a subsequent province-wide vote conducted February 28 and 29, of more than 32,000 teachers who voted, nearly 28,000 said “yes” to escalated job action.

The escalation also follows in protest of the provincial government’s Bill 22 tabled the same time as the Board’s interim order. Bill 22 entitled The Education Improvement Act, empowers the minister to appoint a mediator who is constrained by the net-zero mandate and tasked with reaching agreement on a number of concessions tabled by the employer. According to the BC Teachers’ Federation, the Bill imposes a two-year wage freeze, which means every teacher will lose about \$2,800 in purchasing power.



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