

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 March 2015

Latin America

Argentine teachers union suspends, then resumes, strike over salaries

The Buenos Aires Educators Federation (FEB) lifted its strike March 5 following an assembly in which members voted to return to work. The FEB, along with other educators unions, had called the strike March 2 over the provincial government's refusal to improve its salary offer. The Labor Ministry called for renewed negotiations "in order to advance a rapprochement of the parties."

Only one union, the Udocba (Buenos Aires Province Teachers Union), remained on strike following the vote. The remaining unions—Suteba, Uda, Amet and Sadop—already accepted the government's raise offer of 40 percent for starting salaries and 36 for the rest of the wage scale.

As reported by *infobae.com*, FEB chief Mirta Petrocini remarked that "the voted measures remain in suspense until we can evaluate the results of the encounter, since this is the mandate of the bases and the voice of the teachers."

In the midst of this concession, provincial education department head Nora de Lucía threatened sanctions against teachers and directors who closed down schools and characterized the strike as being of "a minority sector" of the unions.

On March 6, Petrocini left the talks, which she called "not positive" and added, "We were hoping for a sign that something could change. The distortion and flattening [between bottom and top salary levels] continue." She announced that the teachers would hold a 72-hour strike beginning March 9.

Police crackdown on striking Brazilian truckers

On March 1, Brazilian police began a crackdown on

truckers who had begun a strike and blockades two weeks before, arresting protesters and breaking up roadblocks. The truckers, hit by high fuel and freight costs, at one point blockaded nearly 130 key points along major highways in Brazil's southern agricultural regions of Rio Grande do Sul, Parana and Santa Catarina.

The strike and blockades hampered shipments of soybeans, corn and other crops to export terminals. Courts issued orders for the truckers to end their actions, but some continued the blockades. On March 2, President Dilma Rousseff agreed to lower toll costs and overweight fines, as well as easing loan terms for truck purchases, while at the same time deploying highway police to break up the remaining protests.

By March 4, police proclaimed on their web site that there were "zero active roadblocks." There was one casualty of the protests, a driver who was killed when a non-striking trucker drove through a blockade.

Bolivian cable car workers protest mayor's rejection of proposals

About 55 drivers in the May 1st Andean Drivers Federation of El Alto, a former suburb of La Paz, Bolivia, and La Paz province's second largest city, set up pickets and began a hunger strike March 5. They held the action in front of the union headquarters to protest the mayor's refusal to discuss proposals regarding a major route and a new fare structure for riders of public transportation.

Two weeks before, and after several meetings, the mayor's office and the Fejuve neighborhood councils organization agreed to authorize two stages for expansion of public transport, in which a set of five different fares would be in effect. The drivers objected, claiming that the fares would not be sufficient to make a living. In addition to the hunger strike, drivers blocked some of the city's key roads March 6.

Fejuve leaders demanded that the police and military be deployed to guarantee the functioning of the buses. The

union called out about 120 more drivers to strike and carry out blockades. A strong security force was deployed to guarantee that celebrations of El Alto's 30th anniversary would not be disrupted.

The United States

California hotel workers hold two-day strike

Workers at the Dream Inn in Santa Cruz, California, held a two-day strike February 21-22 to oppose hotel management's demand for a three-year wage freeze. The proposed five-year agreement then allows for 1 percent and 2 percent wage increases in the last two years. The proposal also calls for scraping the current health care plan and substituting an inferior one.

About 75 workers, members of Unite Here Local 483, have been without a contract since December 2013. In previous agreements, the union has agreed to give up paid vacation, paid holidays and meal benefits.

Those concessions came after a \$4.2 million renovation. The luxury hotel, located on Monterey Bay, has rooms that averaged \$134.91 a night in 2014, with some rooms as much as \$500 and \$600.

Texas aluminum refinery lockout nearing five months

The 450 workers at the Sherwin Alumina plant near Corpus Christi, Texas, are concluding the fifth month of a lockout after they refused heavy concessions. Management launched the lockout on October 10 after workers rejected cuts in overtime pay, retiree health care benefits, increased premiums and a cut in pay.

Sherwin Alumina moved quickly to bring in replacement workers, who have never before worked in a refinery. USW Local 235-A, which represents the locked-out workers, issued a report, "Sherwin Alumina: Too Great a Risk," highlighting concerns of an explosion associated with the use of inexperienced workers. While dangers undoubtedly exist, the USW left locked-out workers isolated until striking oil workers joined them on picket lines.

Canada

Faculty strike at BC university

Faculty and support workers at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) in Prince George, BC, went on strike last week after waiting in vain for over two weeks for a new proposal from school negotiators.

Over 360 faculty are represented by the UNBC Faculty Association, whose negotiators say that compensation for teachers at the school is at least 20 percent below both the provincial and the national average. This is a long way from what the university is offering, at 5.5 percent over five years.

Support staff represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have joined teachers on the picket line and pledged their support until the strike is resolved.

BC district workers on strike

Workers employed by the District of Kitimat in central British Columbia went on strike last week after contract talks broke down between the town and Unifor, the union representing workers.

With both sides saying it is up to the other to make the next move, workers including inspectors, administration staff and public works employees remain off the job. Strikers have been at odds with some local politicians who have been crossing picket lines to attend council meetings.

District negotiators say that union demands would require raising property taxes by 12 percent but the union has accused city council of misrepresenting the issues to the press and that the real differences go well beyond wages to include health and safety, training and communication issues.



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