

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 October 2016

Brazilian petroleum workers strike over contract

Members of the Petroleum Workers Syndicate of Rio de Janeiro (Sindipetro-RJ) began an open-ended strike September 29 over outstanding issues in the 2015-2017 contract with Petrobras, Brazil's debt-and scandal-ridden semipublic oil corporation.

Sindipetro called the strike to pressure Petrobras to readjust the basic wage scale to conform to the schedule that went into effect in August, an adjustment that would increase pay by 10 percent. The union also denounced the firm's proposal to reduce overtime payments by 50 percent and its stated plans to sell off shares of up to 19.5 billion dollars.

Sindipetro bureaucrats also slammed the government of Michel Temer, which they call illegitimate and the result of a coup, for "a radically neoliberal policy that implies the dismantling of social conquests, lowering of salaries, losses of labor rights," as well as the handing over of the pre-salt—huge but difficult to extract oil reserves located in Brazil's undersea continental shelf—to foreign capital.

Striking Peruvian teachers teargassed by police, two injured

The Cusco branch of Peru's Sutep teachers union called a 72-hour strike beginning September 27 to press their demands for a pay raise, free quality education for children, completion of commitments promised by the present government and the removal of Education Minister Jaime Saavedra.

On the second day of the strike, police launched tear gas canisters at teachers as they marched to the Alejandro Velasco Ateste Airport in Cusco. Two teachers were reportedly injured in the confrontation that ensued. On the third day, a group of teachers entered the esplanade of an archeological complex, blocking tourists.

After the mobilizations, Sutep director Ruth Báez

announced the possibility of bringing charges against the national police chief, Gen. Orfiles Bravo, for not providing protection for the protesters. She also denied that the teachers had intended to occupy the airport, as the police have alleged.

Sutep reps and Saavedra made plans to meet this week. "If we don't have a response, we're going to go on a national strike," claimed Báez.

Strike and protest march by Chilean public employees for wage increase

On September 29, Chilean public employees struck in repudiation of the government's salary raise offer. Negotiators for the National Fiscal Employees Association (ANEF), representing fifteen public employee unions, met with government officials and demanded a 7.9 percent raise. The government offered 2.9 percent, which is below the projected 2016 inflation rate of 3.4 percent.

In Santiago, thousands of workers marched down the capital's main streets to demand the raise. Other demands included labor stability and enhancement of social security. Speakers criticized government "belt tightening" and called for economic stimulus measures.

Strikes and protest actions also took place in other regions.

ANEF claimed 90 percent adherence to the strike. "Ethical shift" skeleton crews were on hand in case of emergencies. Civil Registry workers, however, did not participate in the strike. Their union president, Nelly Díaz, said that the abstention "does not mean that we are disassociating ourselves from ANEF," but that "we are in a process of rapprochement with the citizenry" and claimed that they could not afford "the luxury of closing doors when we are in another process."

Argentine university professors to hold three days of strike action over salary readjustment

Representatives of the Conadu and Conadu Histórica university professors unions met in a white tent across from Argentina's Ministry of Education building in Buenos Aires on September 30. The assembled delegates voted to call a walkout for one day on October 4 and two days on October 13-14 if that job action fails to get the salary readjustment that they demand to keep pace with inflation.

The meeting was held the day after parity talks with the government. The unions had called for a 15 percent hike, but a joint press release stated that "the government refused ... to recompose our salaries. It wants to continue 'monitoring' monthly inflation and is going to reconvene with us on October 12."

The 48-hour action will coincide with a national strike called by other professors unions. The demands put forward will be "a salary adjustment on the order of 15 percent; immediate salary recomposition; no to the tax on salaries; increase in the university budget and the full application of the Collective Work Agreement."

Buenos Aires doctors reject salary offer, call for new strike

The Buenos Aires Health Professionals Syndical Association (Cicop) met with provincial government negotiators on September 30. Cicop rejected as insufficient the government's eventual salary offer, which would put the monthly pay of a public hospital worker without seniority at 16,080 pesos, or US\$1,048.

Cicop called a two-day strike for October 5-6 at the 80 public hospitals and municipal health centers in Buenos Aires.

Cicop president Fernando Corsiglia maintained that the union had also asked for "a new meeting to address a comprehensive proposal that not only includes the salary theme, but also the demand for a benefit system and requests for designations."

Other public health workers unions have already capitulated to the government's refusal to consider a better health plan and reclassification of about 850 hospital workers in Buenos Aires who are classified as "precarious," i.e., casual workers with poor pay and few or no benefits.

California social workers on three-day strike over wages, benefits and staffing

Some 1,000 social workers in Contra Costa County, California went on a three-day strike September 30 to bring attention to stalled contract talks and understaffing. Workers are demanding a 17 percent wage increase and want the county to absorb a greater share of their health care costs. The county is only offering a 10 percent wage increase over the course of a three-year contract.

The Service Employees International Union Local 1021, which represents striking workers, has documented the loss of \$21 million for public assistance programs. According to the union, millions of dollars had to be returned to state and federal sources because the programs the money is targeted towards are understaffed and can't administer the funds. The union estimates vacancies in some departments are as high as 40 percent.

Alberta assisted living workers stymied by government

The provincial NDP government has intervened with the use of an extraordinary legal maneuver to prevent workers at Points West Living Facility in Cold Lake, Alberta from going on strike this week.

Workers had voted to reject the latest offer from Points West, which provides support and care for seniors in the community, and were prepared for strike action last week when the Provincial Labour Minister initiated a Disputes Inquiry Board request which means that any lockout or strike action is now on hold.

Since mediation, the employer has refused to negotiate union demands for improvements in substandard benefits, workloads and wages. According to negotiators for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) which represents workers at the facility, the company has prepared scab labor to replace workers in the event of a work stoppage.



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