

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Protests across Brazil against labor law, pension reforms

Latin America

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

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Thousands of Brazilian workers, retirees and members of social organizations held protests November 11 in 24 of the nation's 26 state capitals and in Brasilia, the Federal District. The mobilizations, dubbed the "Day of Struggle Against Labor Reforms," were called by labor unions and social organizations to express opposition to a new labor law that went into effect that day. The labor law is extremely unpopular in Brazil, with 81 percent disapproving, according to a Vox Populi survey.

The legislation will provide for more "flexibility" in contracts and, in the words of Aristides Veras, president of the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers, will cause "an increase in slave labor, an increase in violence in the countryside, increased precarity of work, decrease of income of workers and increase of conflicts."

"It creates instruments to legalize practices that make work precarious, reduce or prevent union protection and leave the worker exposed to the coercion of companies in the definition of their rights," Clemente Ganz Lucio, director of the Intersyndical Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies, told teleSUR English. Provisions that eliminate obligatory union dues and make unions liable for court costs when they lose challenges are of particular cause of concern to the union hierarchy.

The protests were also directed against changes in the making for the pension system. The pension "reform" would raise the retirement age, no matter how long a worker has labored, and extend the time required to receive full benefits. The trade unions are fostering illusions that the election of a "people's candidate" in 2018 will reverse the austerity trend, which was already in force when the Workers' Party administration of Dilma Rousseff was ousted.

Colombian pilots end strike after 51 days with no issues resolved

Pilots for Colombia's Avianca Airlines voted November 9 to return to work from a strike that they began on September 20 over salaries, benefits and working conditions. The decision was taken in a meeting with Colombia's ombudsman, Carlos Alfonso Negret, and announced that evening by Negret and the head of the ACDAC pilots' union, Capt. Jaime Hernandez.

The strike by over 700 pilots was called following the failure of

negotiations in which Avianca refused to grant ACDAC's demands that they be paid in parity with Avianca pilots in other Latin American countries and have their hours reduced.

Avianca filed a court request that the strike be declared illegal, and when it was granted, ACDAC filed an appeal. As the strike wore on, Avianca hired scabs and used enticements and threats to get some of the pilots to return to work. They also fired some striking pilots, claim that they had reached retirement age, despite the fact that there were nonstriking pilots who also qualified for retirement, but were kept working.

When the government sent Negret to mediate, Avianca refused to attend, and has said that it has not made any deal with the pilots. Following the news of the callback, Avianca chairman German Efromovich told a local radio station, "All the pilots who return to work will be welcomed, but all, without exception, will be subject to disciplinary processes."

Strike, demonstrations by Paraguayan teachers over wage raise demand

Public school teachers held a massive march and demonstration in Asunción, Paraguay, on November 8 to demand a 20 percent pay raise. The teachers' unions had proposed that in addition to the government's proposal of a 12 percent increase in January, an 8 percent raise be added in July. They also called for a budget increase, since Paraguay has the lowest rate of education spending in South America.

After the mobilization, some teachers camped out in front of the downtown Plaza De Armas to await news of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies. By that time, the unions had already voiced their willingness to compromise and accept a one-time 16 percent raise.

On November 9, the camping teachers heard over the Plaza's public address system that the lower-house legislators had rejected the unions' proposal and passed the government's. The unions said that they would take their case to the Senate, where it will be debated next.

Argentine teachers union calls one-day strike against salary delays, "hidden firings"

On the evening of November 10, the ADOSAC teachers' union in the city of Rio Gallegos, in Argentina's southern Patagonia province, announced a 24-hour walkout. The union's president, Pedro Cormack, cited as the reason for the strike the partial payment—73 percent—of wages for the last pay period. Denouncing the payment of "percentages of percentages," Cormack called for full and timely payment of salaries, which includes a 7 percent raise agreed to in 2016.

The strike, scheduled for November 13, was to be carried out as well in solidarity with teachers in the Provincial Music Conservatory, where “modifications” to the study plan, involving cuts to instructional time, are being planned by the Provincial Education Council.

Cormack also slammed the refusal by the provincial government of Alicia Kirchner, sister of the late former president Nestor Kirchner, to negotiate seriously to resolve the issues.

Antiguan construction workers strike briefly over pay and working conditions

About 90 construction workers at an Antigua and Barbuda government building project site downed their tools November 9 to demand better pay and conditions. The workers at the project walked off after two employees were suspended without pay when another worker was caught stealing from a storefront on the site. The two workers, a subcontract worker and a storeroom employee, said that they were unjustly suspended.

The walkout was motivated by more than only the unjust firings. According to an antiguaobserver.com report, “The workers’ concerns also include raise of pay, outstanding overtime, inadequate bathroom facility, lack of running water, late pay, discrepancies in pay calculations, no uniform, and lack of proper safety gear.”

Officials with the Antigua Barbuda Workers Union and the Labour Commission met with the workers and talked them into going back to work two hours later. Reports did not mention whether any of the issues were resolved.

The United States

Strike by New York school bus drivers enters second week

Contract talks between the union representing some 400 striking school bus drivers on Long Island, New York, and Baumann & Sons Buses were to resume November 14 as the strike by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 252 enters its second week. The strike, which also includes mechanics and monitors, affects some 20,000 students in four school districts of Nassau County.

The two sides have deadlocked over wage increases and drivers’ pay on days off during the course of the school calendar. In addition, drivers want a greater percentage of “charter pay” for transporting students to special events. Average pay for drivers is approximately \$28,000, according to the TWU.

Bauman has been using non-union personnel to operate some buses, and the school districts have secured additional transportation from Guardian Bus Company and First Student in an attempt to transport students. Officials for the four school districts are also seeking a request for proposals “from various companies” to replace Bauman. “If the two sides aren’t interested in resolving it, we’re going to have to consider other options for resolving it ourselves,” declared Rockville Centre Superintendent William Johnson.

New York deli workers strike supermarkets

Some 35 deli workers at four Foodtown supermarkets in New York returned to the picket line last week after contract talks broke down. The United Food and Commercial Workers Local 342 went on strike back on October 27 but returned to work after only two

hours on the picket line at the behest of the company.

The workers have been without a contract since 2012. Workers are demanding wage increases with retroactive back to 2012. The strike affects three Foodtown supermarkets in Queens and another one in Nassau County.

Canada

Forensic service workers on strike in Toronto

Around 25 employees at the Forensic Services and Corner Centre (FSCC) in Toronto are on strike after their employer, Carillion Canada, rejected a demand by Teamsters negotiators for a minimal wage increase after workers voted overwhelmingly to give the Teamsters union a strike mandate.

Workers at Carillion who are employed in forensic cleaning and other building maintenance services joined Teamsters earlier this year. Union negotiators have only asked for a C\$1.00-an-hour wage increase but say they are fighting for wage parity with other cleaners at FSCC who make C\$22.00 an hour while those at Carillion are paid only C\$15.23 an hour. The union says it is also fighting for an end to favoritism in the workplace and more respect from management.

Forced vote in month-long Ontario college strike

A total of 12,000 striking faculty at 24 colleges across Ontario are being forced under anti-worker legislation to vote this week on a contract offer that precipitated a break in negotiations last week.

Although agreement has been reportedly reached on staffing levels, the two sides are still at odds over wages and the contentious issue of academic freedom. If the proposed contract passes by even one vote, the strike could be ended and teachers back on the job within a week. The leadership of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) are not recommending the contract, saying that colleges rejected their own proposed changes.

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