

Strike ends at Chilean observatory

ALMA resumes operations after more than two weeks of labour negotiations.

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ALMA

ALMA facilities will resume operations with shorter shifts and higher pay for some workers.

After 17 days of marches, demonstrations and negotiations, a labour strike at a massive radio-telescope facility in Chile has ended. The US\$1.4-billion Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) restarted operations on 9 September after [a shutdown](#) unprecedented for a major astronomical observatory.

On the night of 7 September, the union representing most of ALMA's eligible Chilean staff signed a collective contract to replace one that expired on 13 August. The contract is with Associated Universities Incorporated (AUI), which is based in Washington DC. The company has agreed to many, but not all, of the workers' demands, including a 4% pay rise for union workers on the lower end of the pay scale and a bonus for those who work at ALMA's highest site, some 5,000 metres above sea level on the Chajnantor plateau in the Atacama Desert. Starting on 1 January, work shifts at ALMA will also be shortened to match those at other international observatories in Chile.

According to the union, Sindicato Trabajadores ALMA, one major sticking point during negotiations was whether striking workers would be paid for all the days of the strike. AUI agreed to payment, along with an end-of-conflict bonus. It did not, however, concede to the union's call for a 15% pay rise and holiday bonuses for staff.

"I'm happy we came to an agreement where both sides agree with the final result," says AUI president Ethan Schreier. "It was a long, drawn-out struggle, but I think we've all realized we've come to an acceptable place. It's clear we all gave something."

ALMA observes the sky in millimetre and submillimetre wavelengths, peering into the dust that enshrouds newborn stars and planets as well as cosmically stretched light from distant stars and galaxies. A paper published on 1 September in the *Astrophysical Journal*, for instance, describes early ALMA studies of what could be one of the brightest and most massive protostars in the Milky Way¹. The array, which is nearly complete, will consist of 66 telescope dishes contributed by partners from Europe, North America and Asia. It saw first light in October 2011 and was formally inaugurated in March this year.

During the shutdown, ALMA did not make any new science observations, but many staff astronomers — who were not part of the strike — continued to work, mainly off site. Meanwhile, union workers demonstrated at ALMA facilities, carrying a black coffin emblazoned with the ALMA logo and a sign that read: "Welcome to hell Hardy." (Eduardo Hardy is the AUI's lead representative in Chile.)

Workers at other observatories in Chile and several Chilean astronomers expressed support for the strike. It remains to be seen how the dispute might affect astronomy more generally.

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References

1. Merello, M. *et al. Astrophys. J.* **774**, L7 (2013).