

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 October 2004

Latin America

Brazilian oil workers prepare to strike

Brazil's United Oil Workers Federation recommended last week a yes vote on a proposed five-day strike against Brazil's national oil company Petrobras. At issue is Petrobras's refusal to address the union's wage demand. By October 13, workers' assemblies will have completed the strike vote. The federation represents 40,000 workers.

Since October 4, a number of 24-hour surprise walkouts have taken place at various Petrobras facilities.

The federation is demanding a 13.2 percent increase in wages and retirees' pensions. Petrobras has offered a 12 percent increase in wages and a 7.8 percent rise in pensions.

Brazilian bank workers strike is now 28 days old

At union meetings held last week, striking Brazilian bank employees decided to continue their job action. On October 12, the strike will be 28 days old.

Initially, the strike included employees of both public and private banks. However, the walkout has been weakened by the union's decision to send employees at private banks back to work, leaving public bank workers isolated.

On October 4, the union decided to reduce its wage demand to 19 percent, down from 25 percent. The banks, insisting they cannot afford to go higher than 12.5 percent, rejected the compromise offer.

Supervisors at Chilean copper mine on strike

The supervisor's union at the state-owned Codelco mine in Chile went on strike October 8. The 500 supervisors, who participated in an assembly October 7, approved the job action on the grounds that proper housing is not being built for them.

Puerto Rican water utility workers walk out

On October 4, employees of the government authority of water and sewage (AAA) walked out for a new contract. Some 4,500 workers are on strike. The main issue is medical benefits.

Throughout the week, there have been confrontations between the strikers, members of the Authentic Independent Union, and police who are protecting strikebreakers entering the AAA facilities.

National strike in Colombia scheduled for this week

Colombian labor federations have scheduled a one-day national strike for October 12 to protest the policies of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and demand social rights for all workers.

During the strike, workers plan to march and rally in Bogota and other major cities in defense of pensions and against taxes on basic consumer items. So far this year, there have been 33 national strikes of this sort in Colombia.

United States

New York school bus drivers protest union inaction

School bus drivers, members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181, rallied outside their union hall in Ozone Park on October 7, charging their union leaders with failure to defend seniority rules against their employer, Jo-Lo Bus Company.

Jo-Lo set up another company, Grandpa's Bus Company, and sent its lower-seniority employees to work there. Management then gave the new company several of Jo-Lo's routes. Jo-Lo workers were left to bid on the remaining routes. Affected drivers filed suit in Brooklyn Federal Court last April against the ATU.

When drivers attempted to meet with union president Sal Battaglia, they were told they needed an appointment. Union staff scheduled a meeting for November 4, which means that workers will have to wait nearly a month to discuss their grievance.

St. Louis car dealers settle with Teamsters while machinists continue strike

Parts-department workers, represented by Teamsters Local 618, voted 207 to 69 on October 9 to ratify a new three-year agreement with 61 St. Louis-area new-car dealerships. The agreement brings a 70-day strike to a close. It institutes an annual 25-cents-an-hour wage increase—up from the 15 cents originally proposed by management. The dealerships will continue to provide fully paid health insurance.

One day earlier, rank-and-file machinists voted against a recommendation by their union leadership to accept the dealers' most recent offer by a 699-to-373 margin. Machinists are opposed to management's proposal to progressively increase the ratio of lower-paid helpers to skilled mechanics and have helpers take over performing certain of the mechanics' tasks.

In the most recent proposal, dealers demanded a ratio of one helper for every three mechanics from 2004 to 2006. Starting in 2007, they want to increase the ratio to one helper for every two mechanics. An earlier proposal asked for a one-to-one ratio starting in 2010.

Teamster members have pledged not to cross the machinists' picket lines but, having settled its contract, the Teamsters union says it will no longer issue strike pay.

New York hospital walkout ends without contract

Some 375 members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199 at Nathan Littauer Hospital in Gloversville, New York, returned to work October 5, after a one-week strike failed to get hospital management to return to the bargaining table. The union has been requesting an overall economic increase of 22 percent, affecting wages, overtime rules, health insurance and pensions. Management's offer totals 11 percent.

The SEIU has said it will call a second walkout starting October 28, unless the hospital resumes bargaining. Licensed practical

nurses, maintenance and technical staff, along with lab, pharmacy and nursing assistants, have been without a contract since June 30.

No settlement in San Francisco hotel strike

No settlement has been reached as the union representing 4,000 striking and locked-out hotel workers returned to the bargaining table October 8 with the San Francisco Multi-Employer Group (MEG), which represents owners of 14 of the biggest hotels. The two sides remain divided over wages and health care.

The MEG has offered most workers annual 20-cent wage increases over the course of a five-year agreement and five cents for porters and bartenders who take in tips. But for many workers who earn between \$9 and \$15 an hour, the raise translates into a mere \$8 extra a week. This will be more than eaten up as the hotels demand an increase in workers monthly health care contributions from the present \$10 to \$30 starting this year and a whopping \$273 in 2009.

Unite Here Local 2, which represents the workers involved in the work stoppage, wants a two-year agreement—as opposed to management’s five-year proposal—to align San Francisco hotel contracts with those of other cities.

Atlantic City casino strikers arrested

About 100 striking casino workers blocked vehicular traffic on the main access road to Atlantic City, New Jersey, on Friday night for 20 minutes. According to the police, 80 workers were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct and obstructing traffic. It was well known beforehand that this demonstration was going to take place, and some union officials were already available at the police station to pay the tickets for all those who had been arrested.

About 10,000 workers have been on strike against 7 out of the 12 casinos located in Atlantic City since Oct. 1. The strikers who are service workers, such as waiters, bartenders, housekeepers, porters, and parking valets are represented by Local 54 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union. There have been no talks since the strike began, and none are currently scheduled. The last union strike against the casinos in Atlantic City took place in 1999 and lasted three days.

One of the major issues in the dispute is contract length. The workers are looking for a three-year contract, and the casinos want a five-year settlement. The casinos are opposed to signing a three-year deal because the contracts for both Atlantic City and Las Vegas establishments would then expire at the same time. This would make it possible for the union to strike both of the country’s major gambling resorts simultaneously, giving the workers a negotiating advantage that they now currently lack. The union is also seeking a shorter deal that would make it easier to represent newly hired workers as the casinos expand into non-gambling enterprises, such as restaurants, spas and shopping and entertainment centers.

Canada

Another Wal-Mart faces unionization

A Wal-Mart outlet in St-Hyacinthe, Quebec, could become the third Wal-Mart store in the province to have a union if the application by workers is passed in the coming weeks. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which represents the workers, was successful in getting union recognition at the Wal-Mart outlets in Jonquière and Brossard within the last couple of

months with a combined workforce of more than 330.

Although only the Jonquière outlet has yet been certified, a Labour board ruling is expected in the coming days at the Brossard outlet. Last week, the Board ordered Wal-Mart to stop interfering with unionization efforts, the first decision of its kind against a Wal-Mart store.

End near in east coast iron miners strike

A strike by 400 workers that began in July at Wabush Mines in the province of Newfoundland/Labrador could come to an end if workers ratify the latest contract offer recommended by their union, the United Steel Workers of America. The larger bargaining unit in the dispute ended its strike last month when workers voted to accept a new deal.

On strike against the Iron Ore Company of Canada, the workers had previously rejected an offer from their union, but after the collapse of the strike in Labrador City they were under pressure to accept the deal.

Loggers strike in Newfoundland

Four hundred logging and silviculture workers at Abitibi-Consolidated in Newfoundland went on strike last week with a near-unanimous vote against the company’s last offer. The strikers are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union who are fighting for improvements in wages, pensions, early retirement and training.

Company management claimed it had several weeks of the raw product on hand that is produced by the struck mills at Stephenville and Grand Falls-Windsor, but said it would like to see the dispute resolved quickly.



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