

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 September 2006

Latin America

Peruvian port paralyzed by stevedore strike

Ship-loading and unloading operations at the Peruvian port of Callao have stopped due to a strike by dockworkers. The strike, which began as a 24-hour protest action on September 20 over collective bargaining rights, has now been extended indefinitely. The stevedores are demanding a master contract with all the firms operating in the port instead of separate negotiations with each of the companies. On Friday, 14 cargo ships were stranded at the port.

Both sides are appealing to the Peruvian government. The Peruvian Association of Maritime Agents (APAM), which represents Callao's employers, is demanding that the government intervene and force the longshoremen back on the job before the work stoppage extends to other ports. An APAM spokesperson indicated that the bosses are losing US\$35 million a day from the strike.

David Saavedra, president of the Callao Port and Maritime Workers Union, said management was violating a Labor Ministry decree that ordered APAM and another management group, the Peruvian Port Operators Association (ASPPOR), to negotiate with the union. "We will not lift the strike until the central government intervenes because this is a national issue," declared Saavedra.

Thousands of Brazilian auto workers on strike

Nearly 7,500 auto workers at Volkswagen, Renault and Volvo walked off the job September 20. All three plants are in the suburbs of Curitiba, capital of Parana state in southern Brazil. The workers are member of the Union of Metal Workers of Metropolitan Curitiba (STMGC). One day after the strike began, workers rejected a new wage offer at separate union meetings and voted to extend the strike.

The workers are demanding a 7.85 percent raise, 5.00 percent to make up for past inflation and 2.85 percent to increase living standards. The workers' demands are substantially above management's offer of 4.16 percent and a US\$116 signing bonus.

Volvo employs 1,800 workers at its truck and bus plant in Curitiba, while Renault employs 1,800 and Volkswagen-Audi employs 3,800. All three plants supply both domestic and foreign markets with cars, busses and trucks.

In a separate job action, 9,200 workers at the São Paulo General Motors assembly plant of São Jose dos Campos carried out a 24-hour strike on September 19. The workers are demanding a 7 percent wage hike, down from an initial demand of 13 percent.

The strike began when first-shift workers learned of GM's offer of a 5.47 percent raise and a one-time bonus of US\$185. The first shift walked off the job and went home; second-shift workers joined their comrades later that day. The São Jose plant is the largest of GM's three Brazilian plants.

Venezuelan steel workers to strike this week

Steel workers at the Temium Sidor plant, Venezuela's largest steel plant, announced that a 48-hour walkout is planned for this week to protest the impasse in negotiations for a new contract. Temium Sidor is located in the city of Puerto Ordaz in southern Venezuela. It is owned by Temium, an international consortium formed by the Techint Group of Argentina. It includes plants in Argentina (Sidor, Siderar) and Mexico (Hylsamex.)

Currently, the steel workers are engaged in a slowdown. Management has appealed to the Labor Ministry, claiming that the slowdown is an illegal job action.

Labor protests in Uruguay over wages, free trade treaty with US

On September 21, thousands of workers marched in Montevideo in opposition to the economic policies of the government of President Tabare Vazquez. The protesters rallied at the Economics Ministry, where union leaders accused Vazquez of carrying out policies that have resulted in the deterioration of workers' living standards, including the failure of the National Milk Producers Cooperative to deliver 15,000 liters of milk. The demonstrators rejected the Cooperative's claim that the milk was dumped because of a conflict with the unions

that caused it to spoil.

Many of the protesters also denounced a possible trade treaty with the United States as an “assault on national sovereignty.”

United States

Helicopter pilots strike after failed bargaining

Helicopter pilots who provide transportation services for the gas industry and air medical sector walked off the job September 20 after two and a half years of fruitless bargaining with their employer, PHI. Two days into the strike, PHI issued letters to the strikers informing them they were permanently replaced.

According to PHI, only 25 percent of the company’s 550 pilots are on strike. The Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 108 says about 80 percent of the workforce is supporting the strike. The union says pay, vacation, unused sick time and mandatory overtime have all been contentious issues.

In August, having failed to bring the two sides together, the National Mediation Board released them to settle the dispute on their own. PHI unilaterally implemented a pay increase, but helicopter pilots say they are due more than US\$5 million in back pay.

PHI operates 540 helicopters and 20 fixed-wing aircraft out of bases in 15 states, with the bulk of its operations serving oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico.

Weekend negotiations in Pennsylvania teachers’ strike

A group of school directors, district representatives and union negotiators met over the weekend in an attempt to resolve a strike by teachers in the Hempfield Area School District near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. About 480 teachers walked off the job September 21 after the school board voted 5-4 to reject a tentative agreement that contained last-minute concessions by teachers.

Teachers agreed to language that would have required new hires to work 13 years before reaching the top pay scale, as opposed to the 12-year period required under the old agreement. Members of the Hempfield Area Education Association had been working under a seven-year contract that expired August 21. Teachers gave a unanimous strike authorization in May and again voted unanimously last week before they walked off the job.

Support for the teachers in the community has been strong with parents and students providing food for picketers. The union reports receiving requests from Hempfield graduates to intervene and speak directly to the school board on behalf of teachers.

Minnesota foundry workers end two-day strike

Workers at the Badger Foundry in Winona, Minnesota, voted to accept a new contract offer September 21 and end their two-day strike. The tentative agreement included a wage increase, but Local 63B of the Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics and Allied Worker’s International Union declined to reveal the amount, nor would they give out the contract vote.

Workers originally voted to strike Badger Foundry by a 129-4 vote over the company’s demand to make workers pay a greater portion of health care costs. The new agreement includes a first-time dental plan that, according to the union, will require workers to pay half the insurance costs.

Canada

Hamilton bakery workers on strike

On September 18, 230 workers went on strike at cookie and wafer manufacturer Voortman Cookies in Hamilton, Ontario, 70 km southwest of Toronto. The workers are members of Local 264 of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union.

A central issue in the strike is wages. According to a union representative, the company has seen a growth in profits that was not accompanied by an increase in wages. At the strike vote that took place the previous Saturday, 164 workers out of the 196 who were present voted in favor of a strike.

The workers’ last contract expired June 1 this year.

Deal reached in Voisey’s Bay strike

The strike by 130 employees of Voisey’s Bay Nickel Co. in Labrador will be over if they ratify an agreement reached September 24 between their union, the United Steelworkers (USW) and management. The union’s bargaining committee is unanimously recommending that workers accept the new three-year agreement. Details of the agreement will not be published until after the ratification vote.

The strike at the Voisey’s Bay mine, which is owned by Inco Ltd., commenced on July 28 when the two sides failed to reach an agreement. One of the issues in the dispute was wage parity: workers at another Inco mine in Sudbury, Ontario, earn C\$24 an hour, while the Voisey’s Bay miners make C\$19.



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