

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 August 2007

Transit strike in São Paulo

São Paulo underground rail workers walked off their jobs last Friday, creating traffic congestion in the sprawling industrial center. Adding to the congestion was a strike by surface transit workers in the city's eastern zone, removing 614 buses and trolleybuses from circulation. More than 3,000,000 transit users were affected.

A decision by city authorities to suspend environmental regulations limiting the number of automobiles that can enter the city each day led to further traffic tie-ups. The city also assigned 200 buses to the east side. The subway workers are demanding a profit-sharing agreement with Metro-rail, a government-owned transit agency.

Five judges from the Regional Labor Court (TRT) moved quickly to declare the strike action "abusive" and demanded that the workers return to their jobs. The TRT also imposed a daily fine of US\$53,000 per day on the Metro-rail workers' union for not maintaining service at a level of 85 percent.

Union president Flavio Godoi declared that negotiations had been stalled for months and that the workers "have the right to strike to claim what is theirs." For his part, São Paulo State Transit Secretary José Luiz Portella declared that he would only reopen negotiations when the Metro-rail workers agreed to restore service to the 85 percent level.

Despite Godoi's rhetoric, the Metro-rail union ended the strike on Saturday.

Argentina: Communications workers walkout in Buenos Aires

The strike by employees of Telefónica Argentina continued last week. Workers are demanding higher wages and better working conditions. The strike is led by the Buenos Aires local of the Telephone Workers and Employees Federation (FOETRA—Buenos Aires.) Employees affiliated with a second union—Argentine Telecommunications Workers Federation—are showing

up at their places of employment but not performing their jobs.

The strikers are demanding a 25 percent wage hike. Labor Ministry officials claim that the privatized telephone company has already agreed to changes in working conditions demanded by the strikers.

Teachers strike in Honduras

Sixty thousand teachers went on strike last Wednesday to protest a government audit to reevaluate teachers' jobs and wages. During this 48-hour job action, teachers reported to their schools but refused to admit any students. Union leader Sergio Rivera described the teachers' occupation tactic as a "slowdown." Rivera indicated that, while the protest strike ended on Friday, there would be other, unspecified actions next week. "The strike continues," said Rivera, "and our mobilization will continue to show our strength."

The strikers are demanding the hiring of 5,000 additional teachers, better pensions for 4,000 retirees, and that the government pay back wages owed since last year.

Strikes escalate in Mexico

La Jornada, a Mexico City daily newspaper, reported on Sunday that between January and the end of June, labor strikes hit 3,715 firms, the highest number in 15 years. The number represents a 37 percent increase in firms affected by strikes relative to the average between 1994 and 2007. The strike wave did not affect each industry equally. In mining, for instance, the 50 recorded walkouts are right at the historical average. In construction, on the other hand, there was a significant increase in strike activity, 435 strikes, compared to less than half that number for the first six months of 2006.

Workers at New York plant walk out over healthcare givebacks

Some 400 workers for Dresser-Rand walked off the job at its Painted Post plant in New York August 4 on an unfair labor practices strike. Negotiators for the

International Union of Electronic Workers Local 313 charge that the company altered its original proposal, submitted two days earlier, to include higher out-of-pocket costs for healthcare.

The company's healthcare proposal would require workers to pay more than in past years for fewer benefits. Three days earlier, workers had voted by a 93 percent margin to reject the company's offer and then voted by 95 percent to strike.

Workers' anger has been also stoked by a \$12 million bonus received by the company's CEO under conditions where workers have suffered 20 percent pay cuts. Dresser-Rand makes compressors for the military and industrial consumption.

15,000 workers on strike in British Columbia

More than 15,000 workers remain on strike in the province of British Columbia as talks resumed this weekend between the city of Vancouver and three different groups of municipal workers. Negotiations had been broken off the preceding weekend, when city negotiators walked away after only two hours. Vancouver's outside workers have been on strike since July 20, inside workers have been on strike since July 23, and library workers have been on strike since July 26.

Meanwhile, in neighboring North Vancouver, district and recreation commission workers voted Saturday to accept a tentative agreement and will return to work Tuesday. Although details of the agreement have been withheld, there has been media speculation that it includes a wage increase of 17.5 percent over five years. The workers had been on strike since July 24. Negotiations continue between North Vancouver and city workers represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 389.

On Vancouver Island and up the coast, nearly 7,000 forestry workers are continuing their strike that began July 21, closing down the entire industry (in British Columbia). According to the union president, many of the striking workers have begun to seek and find work elsewhere. Work scheduling, contracting out and severance pay are major issues in the dispute.



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