

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Latin America

Mexico: AeroCalifornia employees go on strike

Pilots and other employees employed by AeroCalifornia airlines, which operates out of the Mexican State of Baja California Sur, went on strike on August 1. About 1,400 workers are involved. The airline suspended operations on July 24 due to insolvency. At that time, it also broke off all communication with its employees.

Rodrigo Brown, president of the Pilot's Commission, which represents the striking pilots, declared that the strike will continue until the workers obtain a "positive response" from the airline. In the state capital of La Paz, workers flocked to the offices of the Labor Department demanding legal aid on this matter. According to one of the government employees at the site, the company is guilty of improperly dismissing its employees. Many workers suspect that the airline, which is being reorganized under government auspices, has taken advantage of this crisis to sack its workers, using the insolvency as a convenient pretext.

Buenos Aires teachers to strike this week

On Sunday, teachers unions in Argentina's most populous province announced that their members will strike this week barring an 11th hour settlement. The walkout will include private and public school teachers. The teachers are demanding a wage increase of 20 percent in addition to a 24 percent wage increase they received earlier this year.

The teachers are demanding a basic monthly wage of 1,800 pesos (US\$600). Teachers point out that their demand is only US\$180 above the country's minimum wage, established this month by the national government.

Official figures indicate a current inflation rate of 9.3 percent in Argentina, but most experts accuse the government of under-reporting inflation. The actual

rate of inflation may be as high as 30 percent.

Colombian truckers extend their strike

On August 4, 200 striking Colombian truckers mobilized in Bogotá, marching with flags and signs, to pressure the Uribe administration to increase trucking rates. The strike is beginning to affect coffee exports and the availability of food in the cities.

The drivers' convoy was blocked from the vicinity of the Transportation Ministry by army and police units. The truckers, many of them owner-operators, belong to the Colombian Truckers Association (ACC). The ACC reported that so far, 100,000 truckers have joined the protest.

The ACC also points out that a government rate schedule is largely ignored by the hauling companies. Combined with the high cost of fuel, many strikers complain that they are nearly bankrupt. Their demands have been largely ignored by the Transportation Ministry.

The strike is affecting the movement of cargo in and out of the country's ports, affecting coffee exports and food imports.

United States

Deadlock in strike by Kentucky workers at industrial plant

Workers at Daramic Inc. in Owensboro, Kentucky, walked out on strike August 6 after contract negotiations failed to resolve a deadlock that has gone on for months. The 165 members of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Local 762 have twice turned down company offers since their contract expired back on April 7. According to management, the most recent agreement—rejected in June—called for annual wage increases of 3.0 and 3.5 percent.

Local 762 President Jeff Campbell claims that wages are not the issue. Instead, the company is seeking to gut seniority rights and consolidate jobs while cross-training workers. "It is our belief that they've constructed this to weed out employees," said

Campbell. The union is also opposed to the company's attempt to alter the attendance policy.

No new talks are scheduled. A Daramic spokesperson issued a statement, declaring, "We are aggressively implementing our contingency plan to operate our plant and make every effort to meet our customers' needs." The company has contracted security firm Nuckols & Associates to man gates and film strikers. The company manufactures battery separators at the Owensboro facility.

Grand jury subpoena issued to Iowa meatpacker

Agriprocessors Inc., the world's largest kosher slaughterhouse, located in Postville, Iowa, was issued a grand jury subpoena requesting documents in the wake of the recent raid on the slaughterhouse by the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement that led to mass arrests and deportation processes against immigrant workers. It is not clear whether the subpoena relates to non-payment of wages, the illegal hiring of teenagers, or allegations by animal-rights activists of mistreatment of animals in its slaughterhouse operations.

Agriprocessors was set up in Iowa in 1987 by Aaron Rubashkin and his family to supply the burgeoning demand for kosher products. The Associated Press listed a number of past problems incurred by the family and its operations in other fields. One son of Rubashkin, a New York rabbi, pleaded guilty to bank fraud in 2002 after writing bad checks totaling \$325,000. The same son pleaded guilty this year to storing hazardous waste without a permit at one of the family's closed textile plants in Allentown, Pennsylvania. A politically connected son-in-law was charged in 2003 with misusing a \$700,000 federal loan.

Last year, Agriprocessors paid \$1.4 million to settle a lawsuit involving payments from a New York health and beauty supply company that was going through bankruptcy. Parties to the suit charge the bankrupt company had issued \$2.9 million in suspicious payments to Agriprocessors aimed at hiding assets.

Canada

Montreal hotel strike widens

Workers at the Queen Elizabeth hotel in downtown Montreal went on strike last week joining thousands of hotel workers across the province of Quebec who are off the job due to either strike or lock-out.

Workers at the Queen Elizabeth, Quebec's largest

hotel, went on strike on August 5, but their action was limited to a maximum of 72 hours. The Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), representing 5,500 workers at 40 hotels, is currently negotiating new contracts in the province and has staged numerous limited job actions over the past month. The union leadership cites outstanding issues of wages, health insurance and increasing workloads in the dispute. Last weekend, the local leadership said they would seek a mandate for full strike action.



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