

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

Guatemalan teachers on hunger strike are hospitalized

Three Guatemalan teachers employed by a Catholic school, part of a group of hunger strikers across from the cathedral in Guatemala City, had to be hospitalized on Sunday. The teachers are protesting because they have not been paid in two months. Another 10 hunger strikers declared that they will continue their action.

The hunger strike began on Friday, August 15. The school, Fe y Alegría (Faith and Happiness), is a Jesuit Institution that receives money from the Guatemalan government. Edgar White, a spokesperson for the striking teachers, declared: “When school authorities find it convenient, they claim to have no responsibility because they are part of the church. Things that have to do with money pertain to the state, even though the money goes to them. For that reason we are on hunger strike.”

The school employs more than 600 teachers who serve 16,000 pupils in 47 locations in some of the poorest districts in Guatemala where there are no government schools.

Civic and trade union organizations march in Panama over high cost of living

On August 14, supporters of the “Coordinating Committee for the Respect of the Life and Dignity of the Panamanian People” marched in Panama City in anticipation of a general strike to protest the high cost of living. Hundreds of laborers, educators, professionals and students marched through downtown Panama City and rallied at Panama’s Government House, where a petition was handed to representatives of Panama’s executive branch.

The petition demands an across-the-board wage increase, a price freeze for basic consumer items, and the ending of mining practices that damage the

environment. The Committee also opposes new security measures that, on the pretext of combating delinquency and organized crime, reintroduce militarism and political espionage. For that reason, the marchers also called for the resignation of the intellectual authors of those new measures: Presidential Chief of Staff Carlos García, Government Minister Severino Mejía, Education Minister Mirna Crespo and Labor Minister Felipe Cano.

The date of the national strike will be announced on August 23.

Argentina: tire workers strike

Workers employed in the Pirelli, Fate, and Bridgestone-Firestone plants, members of the Argentine Union of Pneumatic Workers (SUTNA), went on strike August 14 in the wake of the collapse of negotiations mediated by the Ministry of Labor. When, in accordance with Argentine Labor law, the Labor Ministry imposed a 10-day cooling-off period and imposed forced mediation, the tire workers suspended a previous strike. According to SUTNA leader Pedro Wasiejko, the 10-day period ended without progress on the outstanding issues: the rehiring of 100 sacked workers and a 35 percent wage increase.

The conflict originally began July 24, when the workers went on a 48-hour strike demanding a wage increase. The next day, the firms sacked 100 workers.

Tense negotiations at VW in México—workers reject “social peace”

In an effort to resolve stalled negotiations, the union that represents assembly workers at the VW plant in Puebla, México, surveyed the 11,300 assembly workers on a management proposal that would have replaced the traditional negotiations with a so-called “paz social” (social peace) agreement, consisting of a guaranteed yearly wage and an increase in benefits of at least 5 percent.

On August 16, the workers met in 16 separate venues and narrowly rejected the company’s proposal 50.96

percent to 49.11 percent.

The Puebla plant in central México VW assembles Beetle, Jetta and Bora models that are sold worldwide. Its target this year is the production of a record 450,000 vehicles. Negotiations are to begin anew this week in México City. According to the contract currently in force, the workers are free to strike after August 15.

United States

New York state workers strike credit union

Workers at western New York's largest locally based credit union launched a strike August 15 protesting proposed changes in their healthcare coverage. Cornerstone Community Federal Credit Union, citing increased health insurance costs of 53 percent during the period 2004-2008, has proposed workers pay an additional 5 percent of premium costs.

Workers point out that management has substituted a new, inferior plan that includes a higher deductible. Workers wanting to retain the old health plan would have to shoulder the difference in costs.

The old four-year contract covering the 73 tellers, customer service representatives and clerks, members of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 212, expired in November 2007. Union and management met 18 times before union members finally voted to reject the credit union's offer on June 16. Workers voted down a second agreement on August 12 that was reportedly the same as the earlier proposal.

Stella D'Oro cookie factory on strike

New York 1, New York City's cable channel, has reported that workers at the Stella D'Oro cookie factory in the Bronx went on strike last Friday, August 15. Shouting on the picket line "no contract, no cookies," the workers say that they took this action in response to the company's demand that they lower their wages and sick pay and reduce the number of paid holidays.

The Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union Local 50, the union that represents the strikers, has not met with the company since last week, and no meetings are currently scheduled.

Preparations go forward for one-day strike at California hospital chain

Some 2,400 healthcare workers at five California hospitals are preparing a one-day strike August 28

against Daughters of Charity Health System to protest contract language that would eviscerate the right of workers to have any say in patient care. The controversial language advanced by hospital negotiators is known as the "manager's rights" clause.

Workers are also protesting the slow pace of contract talks. According to the union, management has simply reworded its demands without changing their substance. Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) who work at facilities in San Jose, Gilroy, Daly City, Moss Beach and Lynwood voted by an overwhelming margin back in June to strike the hospital chain.

Canada

Workers strike world's largest potash producer

Five hundred workers at the Potash Corporation in the province of Saskatchewan in western Canada went on strike August 7 at three mining and milling operations that produce 6 percent of the world's potash.

The United Steel Workers (USW) is seeking improvements in wages and benefits for the workers as well as greater control over the use of contract workers. The strike is the first in the company's history, and the union says it is fighting to set a precedent in a new contract with a demand for "commodity-based" bonuses that will be tied to the price of potash, which is used in the production of fertilizer.

As prices for potash soar around the world, company profits were triple those of a year ago at C\$1.5 billion. The top three company executives now hold stock options valued at C\$846 million.



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