Workers struggles: The Americas

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Peru: Public health doctors' strike

Twenty thousand public health doctors went on strike September 15 to protest violations of their wage agreement. The strikers are also demanding the resignation of Health Minister Hernán Garrido Lecca.

Julio Vargas, president of the Peruvian Medical Federation, told the press Sunday that negotiations deadlocked after Prime Minister Jorge del Castillo declined to give the government's answer to the doctors' wage demands pending approval by the Economic Ministry.

Vargas said that the Federation has been in negotiations since January and that a contract that was agreed to then was never implemented by the government. The January contract was signed following a 21-day strike.

The doctors are demanding that the government grant extra compensation to doctors assigned to remote regions. They are also demanding a budget increase for the public health sector. Peruvian President Alan Garcia declared that his government would not be tempted by easy solutions. "We could double doctors' salaries and not build hospitals," said Garcia.

Colombia: Court employees strike

On September 16, a national strike by Colombian court workers will be 13 days old. The union that represents the strikers has agreed to mediation in an attempt to resolve the dispute. Forty thousand employees are on strike. The strikers are demanding wage parity and respect for the independence and autonomy of the courts.

Buenos Aires teachers strike

Public school teachers in the Argentine Province of Buenos Aires went on strike on September 10 over wages. It is the fifth strike by Buenos Aires teachers this year. The strike began after four of the five unions that represent Buenos Aires teachers voted down a government offer for a 12 percent wage increase. The fifth union, which represents teachers at private schools, accepted the offer and is not participating in the job action.

Buenos Aires Province Governor Daniel Scioli vowed not to pay teachers for their days on strike and requested that the educators reconsider and accept the government offer. The government also extended the school year to December 19.

Mexican teachers protest union leader

Teachers in the southern state of Veracruz booed the leader of the national Executive Committee of the teachers' union, Rafael Ochoa Guzmán, to express their anger over the capitulation of long-time union leader Elba Esthet Gordillo.

Scores of teachers chanted "Down with Gordillo!" at an outdoor rally in the Veracruz bullfighting stadium.

Teachers had been brought to the rally to introduce them to the SNTE union's legislative team. The event brought together 15,000 teachers angry over reduced federal health benefits and a new teacher accountability law that many teachers interpret as the first step toward the privatization of the system. Gordillo and the SNTE bureaucracy accepted both measures over the heads of the rank and file last month.

The SNTE bureaucracy nearly lost control of the rally when the secretary of local 32 of the SNTE called for the assembled teachers to send Gordillo a greeting. The chants of "down with Gordillo" became deafening.

Final offer from company issued in Wisconsin trash haulers' strike

Waste Management, the giant Texas-based garbage-collection company, issued a "last, best and final offer" to 240 striking trash haulers in the six-county area around Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The proposed five-year agreement offers wage increases of 10-15 percent during the first year and subsequent increases of 3 percent in each of the remaining four years.

The major sticking point in the strike is Waste Management's demand to halt contributions to the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund, which provides workers with a defined benefit retirement plan, and substitute a 401(k) defined contribution plan—into which

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workers rather than the company would make payments—administered by a third party.

Teamsters Local 200, which represents the striking sanitation workers, initially called the strike on August 26 charging the company had not provided the union with a complete written agreement.

Waste Management rejected a compromise offer by the Teamsters modeled on the new pension fund that the union has set up with United Parcel Service. UPS withdrew from the Central States Pension Fund in 2007.

The largest waste and hauling business in North America, Waste Management operates 22,000 vehicles and provides services to 21 million customers. The company employs around 50,000 workers and generates annual revenues in excess of $13 billion.

Tentative agreement in Washington state teachers strike

Twelve hundred striking Washington state teachers reached a tentative agreement last week with the Bellevue school district that addresses disputes over school curriculum and pay. The district accepted the teachers' proposal to alter the district's new web-based common curriculum by allowing the teachers to change daily lesson plans without prior approval.

Teachers had complained that the new curriculum did not allow them to take into consideration the individual needs of their students. The district also agreed to a 5 percent pay increase for the teachers over the next three years.

During the strike, the school board met to consider taking legal action to force the teachers to return to work, but approximately 800 community members came to a meeting and many spoke against such an action.

The union began the strike on September 2, the first day of school. If the new proposal is ratified, teachers will return to work the beginning of this week.

Janitors hold one-day protest strike at Denver mall to protest anti-union activity

Janitors staged a one-day strike September 9 at a suburban Denver mall owned by Chicago-based General Growth Properties (GGP). The 20 janitors are protesting harassment by Illinois-based The Millard Group aimed at frustrating their attempts to organize a union.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) charges that the company uses surveillance tactics and has directly instructed workers to not talk to union organizers. The SEIU says the strike is the first of several actions planned at 20 GGP-owned malls nationwide. GGP owns, maintains an interest in or manages some 200 malls in 45 states, including the largest open-air shopping mall in the world located in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Grain union ends strike without contract

Union officials agreed to suspend a strike by more than 800 workers at Viterra Inc. in the province of Saskatchewan while workers vote on what the company has called its final offer, containing the same provision for performance-based reward that workers previously rejected.

Two different bargaining units have been involved in the province-wide job action since July—some on rotating, and others on full strike. Along with performance incentives, there were a number of other outstanding issues such as work hours and benefit provisions. It is unclear whether those have been addressed in the latest offer.

According to Viterra, which is the largest grain company in Canada, the deal would mean a 6 percent pay increase over the term of the five-year deal, as well as the possibility for 6 percent in performance-based increases the following year and 5 percent in the last three years. The workers affected are represented by the Grain Service Union, whose leader, Hugh Wagner, was quoted as saying, "We've said all along we don't want to inconvenience or hamper the harvest operations."

Graphics workers strike in Saskatoon

Eighty workers at Mercury Graphics in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, walked off the job last week after their union, the Communication Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), rejected the company's final offer.

According to the CEP, the company is asking workers for a raft of concessions including paying their own benefits, a cut in pensions, a wage freeze and a rollback in overtime. Workers at the company have been without a contract since last February. Talks are continuing this week.

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