

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 July 2009

National strike in Honduras

A two-day strike began July 23 to demand the return of deposed President Manuel Zelaya. The strike—organized by the Popular Block (BP), a coalition of labor and neighborhood groups—included teachers, utility workers, and public health workers. The latter occupied public health hospitals across the country while others blocked the country's main highways.

Peruvian iron miners end strike

Over 1,000 miners employed by Shougang Hierro Peru, owned by a Chinese firm, ended their strike July 24. Workers, who walked out on July 13, agreed to go back after management granted a wage increase. Union leader, Julio Ortiz, declared that the workers had ended the strike even though they were not satisfied with the amount of the raise.

The workers were ordered by the Labor Ministry to return to work after it told Shougang to raise daily wages by US \$1.10 and to grant the miners a one-time bonus of US\$433. The workers went back under protest and are appealing the Labor Ministry decision.

"This is no solution to our dispute," said Ortiz, "We have appealed this decision." The workers are demanding a daily raise of US \$3. Currently, iron miners at the mine earn an average of US\$550 per month.

Argentine metal workers to strike this week

Argentine metal workers, members of the Metallurgical Union (UOM), have declared their intention to strike July 30. The strike would affect all UOM represented workplaces in Argentina. The announcement came at the end of a one-day national strike last Friday. The workers are demanding a 22 percent wage increase.

Management offered a one-time bonus of US\$200. UOM leader, Antonio Calo, said, "We have been in negotiations since March 1. Negotiations have never lasted so long." He said union members are finding it impossible to live on the same wages they were receiving in March.

On Friday, workers rallied in downtown Buenos Aires, across from the Chamber of Commerce, demanding that employers address their demands. Fifteen thousand workers participated in the rallies across the country. The UOM represents 250,000 metal workers.

Six-week strike ends at Texas Helicopter firm

The 2,500 workers at Bell Helicopter plants in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas returned to work this week after accepting a new four-year contract, ending their six-week strike. By a 2-1 margin, members of United Auto Workers Local 218 voted to accept a contract that is worse than the contract originally offered to them back on June 14 when they defied the local leadership's recommendation to accept.

The signing bonus on the new agreement dropped from \$4,500 to \$3,500 and the contract was extended from three to four years. Wages will be frozen in the

first year followed by three percent increases in each of the three remaining years. Workers are also eligible for cost-of-living increases.

A major issue in the strike was the company's insistence on outsourcing of 44 janitorial positions. That clause was retained with a promise by the company to find jobs for the workers impacted by the cut elsewhere in the company. In the past, workers who were laid off from production jobs often bumped into the janitorial classification. Bell said it would create 30 positions that production workers can bump into. However, that measure will expire after the second year of the new agreement.

Weekend national rail strike

A Canada wide strike by engineers at Via Rail Canada, which began Friday was brought to an abrupt end before the weekend was out when union leaders agreed early Sunday morning to end the strike with binding arbitration.

The strike by 343 locomotive engineers, who are represented by the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC), paralyzed passenger rail service across the country amid an anti-union media blitz centred in Ontario against striking municipal workers in Toronto and Windsor.

Main issues in the dispute centred on scheduled time off, job qualification as well as wages. Rail service across Canada resumed late Sunday and the threatened lay-off of up to 2,400 unionized workers was put on hold. Union leaders explained that because there was "no possible agreement in the short term," they agreed to final and binding arbitration.

Telecom union locks out office staff

Employees of the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU) in Surrey, British Columbia were locked out by their employer July 10 as a result of what the union calls economic challenges created by the

telecommunications giant Telus, which has been moving work offshore.

The 13 workers affected are organized under the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union (COPE), which says that the TWU is in a good financial position with a growing membership—a claim that the TWU disputes. In imposing the lockout the TWU unilaterally extended the workweek and halted the existing grievance procedure. The previous contract expired in late 2007 and the company is calling the situation a "soft" lock-out, wherein its employees continue to work under the new terms it has imposed.



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