Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Dockworkers strike in Buenos Aires

Exports from Buenos Aires' container docks have stopped due to a strike that began last Friday. The job action pits the Longshore Union (SUPA), representing longshoremen, against the Riggers Union (SGMGM), which represents crane operators. The labor ministry had imposed mandatory arbitration, but SUPA leaders ignored the order and launched a strike. At least 17 ships have unloaded their cargo in Montevideo, across the La Plata River from the Argentine capital.

SUPA is demanding wage and benefit parity with the riggers. SUPA also accuses SGMGM of a strategy of taking longshore jobs.

Volkswagen workers strike in Mexico

After striking for five days, 9,400 union workers employed by Volkswagen in Puebla, Mexico, returned to work on Saturday after the company agreed to a 3 percent wage increase, far short of the original demand of 8.25 percent. In addition, the employees will receive a bonus of 2000 pesos (US$153).

The agreement came after 17 hours of uninterrupted negotiations. Volkswagen management originally offered no wage increase comparable with agreements at other auto assembly plants in Mexico, claiming that the state of the economy made any wage increase impossible. However, Arturo Monter Cortez, spokesman for the union, said that the union refused to accept anything less than the 3 percent. "We have always been very flexible," said Monter, "We've accepted the weight of a crisis that we did not create but have been asked to pay for time and time again."

Monter also indicated that Volkswagen's rank-and-file workers are very unsatisfied since the 3 percent wage increase is below Puebla's 6 percent inflation rate.

Colombian steel workers threaten strike

Workers at Acerias Paz del Rio in Colombia are demanding the rehiring of 80 miners who were sacked when the coal mine La 45 was shut down. La 45 belongs to Acerias Paz del Rio, which in turn is controlled by the Brazilian transnational Votorantin Metais. Acerias is the steel mill that is located together with the mine in the city of Belencito in the Department of Boyaca in north-central Colombia.

Workers decided to continue the struggle and have threatened to paralyze the Department of Boyaca where the steel mill and mine are located. According to one worker quoted in the Colombian press, "We tolerated sackings in the steel mill. Now that they have laid off miners it is just too much."

Illinois social workers end two-year strike

Striking social workers at Heartland Human Services in Effingham, Illinois ended their two-year strike after ratifying a new contract August 21. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) representative Jeff Bigelow told the *Effingham Daily*

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News that the workers won "substantial" salary increases along with more holidays, paid time off and work rules. For its part, management has offered no timetable of when strikers will be allowed to return to work. Management continued operating the facility throughout the walkout.

AFSCME spokesman Anders Lindall told *In These Times* that AFSCME had worked out a quid pro quo, where the union would help lobby the legislature for increased funding in exchange for a contract. "The most effective way to fight for restoring funding was as a community, but we couldn't go arm-in-arm with them if we didn't have a contract," said Lindall.

The 40 workers at the privately owned facility which provides medical and psychological services to patients, organized as AFSCME Local 3494 a little more than two years ago. After failing to reach an agreement they went out on strike in July 2007 over wages and benefits. In July 2008, they attempted to return to work but were locked out.

Harley-Davidson contemplates relocating Pennsylvania plant

Motorcycle manufacturer Harley-Davidson is assessing four new locations for the relocation of its York, Pennsylvania manufacturing facility that currently employs 2,300 workers.

The company has called its York plant inefficient and wants to be rid of the job classifications dictated by its contract with the International Association of Machinists (IAM). In 2007, IAM members struck the plant for three weeks and forced a compromise on a company demand to impose a two-tiered wage structure that paid new hires lower wages.

According to the *Associated Press*, the union is collaborating in the relocation process: "Company and union officials toured locations in Murfreesboro, Tenn., Shelbyville, Ind., Shelbyville, Ky., and Kansas City, Mo., over the last week as the company assesses a possible move."

The relocation is part of a company-wide plan to cut costs. In July, the Milwaukee-based manufacturer reported a 91 percent decline in second quarter profits and plans to cut 1,000 jobs.

Montreal city workers to strike

After two years without a contract, the union representing 5,000 outside workers in the city of Montreal, Quebec have called a one-day strike for the last day of August to protest the slow pace of negotiations.

According to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the union has been waiting since June for the latest offer from the city. The action would be the first strike of its kind in the city in 18 years. While the city claims that the union is seeking to recoup concessions made in its last contract, the union maintains that it is merely seeking minimal wage gains and provisions against contracting out of work—the city just signed a $355 million contract with a private company for water metering.

The two sides have been in negotiations over the designation of essential services since the strike date was announced last Wednesday and a mediator was brought in Monday to settle the matter.

Ontario driver examiners on strike

550 workers at DriveTest facilities across the province went on strike August 21 against Serco DES Inc., the company with the contract for driver testing in the country's most populous province.

Driver examinations were privatized in the province in 2003 when Serco DES won its first 10-year contract and set up 55 DriveTest offices across Ontario. The United Steelworkers union represents the striking driving examiners and the main areas of dispute are wages, overtime and sick days. According to the union, many of its members are only employed through the summer months and are laid off during the winter, making job security one of the key issues.

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