

Workers struggles: The Americas

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

Chile: A strike shuts down public health clinics

Thirty thousand public health workers went on strike on August 24 demanding that the government increase its subsidies to clinics. The government of President Michelle Bachelet declared the strike "unnecessary," claiming it has already increased subsidies significantly. This is a reference to a recent decision to increase the subsidies to US \$45 million, a paltry sum in the opinion of the strikers.

According to Esteban Maturana, the health workers' union leader, over 90 percent of public employees are supporting the strike. Maturana also indicated that some essential services are being maintained by the strikers working "ethical shifts" at clinics.

However, the union has come under attack for stopping such services as the provision of milk and formula for children. This program was instituted in the early 1970s during the presidency of Salvador Allende and established the practice of providing a daily half liter of milk for pregnant mothers and all babies up to the age of two.

Uruguay: Strike at the Jose Martí eye hospital

Workers at the Jose Martí eye hospital in Montevideo went on strike August 27. The strike is of indefinite duration and is to coincide with a 48-hour strike by non-medical public health personnel across the country.

The workers are demanding that their salaries be brought up to date. The Uruguayan government owes a longstanding debt to the workers. In addition, the strikers are demanding a wage increase for all those workers that are working 36 hours a week. The eye hospital treats 400 people and conducts 50-60 surgeries a day; patients come from all over Uruguay.

Argentina: All workers return to work

All workers in the Patagonian Province of Santa Cruz, Argentina, ended a three-week strike on Friday. Initially, the workers had walked out to demand a 25-percent wage increase. In the end, they accepted a 20 percent offer, though workers extended the strike over the demand that they be paid for the days they were out.

The committee that represents the oil-producing companies has refused to pay wages for the days in which the employees ignored a government order for mandatory arbitration. In the end, the government ordered the oil companies to pay for these days on the condition that during future strikes workers agreed to a skeleton crew to maintain a minimum level of oil production. The union must also pay a US \$90,000 fine to cover the cost of alleged vandalism during the strike. The strike affected five major oil companies:

Chevron, Occidental Petro Gas, Sipetrol (a Chilean oil company), Repsol YPF, and Pan-American Energy.

Florida air cargo workers strike

Pilots and flight engineers at Miami-based Amerijet International went on strike August 27 after management walked out of mediated contract talks. The Airline Division of the Teamsters has been attempting to negotiate a first-time contract with Amerijet since October of 2004, as workers have been working at the same wage rate since 1999.

That static wage was interrupted last March when the company imposed a 10-percent wage cut and reduced benefits. Amerijet is demanding a five-year contract that includes no wage increases during its last 20 months. The Teamsters are seeking a four-year contract that reinstates the 10-percent wage cut in the first year, and then implements three-percent wage hikes during each of the remaining three years.

Amerijet supplies air cargo service to Gulf and Caribbean Islands. It currently employs 560 people, including 58 pilots.

Washington state teachers strike over working conditions

Public school classes in Kent, Washington, were cancelled August 30, after the Kent School District and the union representing 1,700 teachers failed to reach an agreement. Eighty-six percent of Kent teachers voted to strike five days earlier, and the most recent negotiations have failed to overcome differences concerning classroom size and the time teachers have to spend with students.

Some teachers complain of class sizes as high as 45 and have called on the district to delve into its \$21

million in reserve funding to help reduce the problem, but administrators have refused, claiming it is too costly and the reserves have been earmarked for other expenses.

Some 100 teachers' contracts remain unresolved out of a total of 175 districts that have bargaining agreements up for renewal. Kent School District is the fourth largest district in the state of Washington.

Manitoba newsprint workers locked out

Over 250 workers at Tembec, Inc., in Pine Falls, which is just north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, will be locked out as of September 1 as the company seeks to impose a 35-percent cut to wages and benefits in a new contract.

The Montreal-based company had been in negotiations for only two weeks with the two unions representing its workers-United Steelworkers Union (USW) and the Canadian Office and Professional Employee Union (COPE)-when it made the announcement of the lockout. The unions issued a statement calling the move an "all-out effort" to gut provisions in a new contract, but have appealed to the company to work with them to resolve the impasse.

Tembec produces newsprint by a process that it says puts it at a competitive disadvantage with US companies. USW leaders say they are willing to help the company find ways to cut costs.



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