

# Workers struggles: The Americas

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

## Auto workers strike in Brazil

On September 4, 5,000 workers at the Renault-Nissan auto plant in Sao Jose Dos Pinhais, in the vicinity of Curitiba in southern Brazil, walked off their jobs over wages. The strike is of indefinite duration, according to union sources.

The strike joins an earlier walkout by 3,000 workers at the Volkswagen-Audi plant in the same city, who are also fighting for better wages. The workers voted to strike on Friday morning at a mass meeting after being informed by the negotiating team that management had reduced its wage offer. Initially, the company had offered a 5.7 percent wage raise. The new offer is for 4.7 percent plus an additional US\$750 bonus for each worker. The union demand is for a wage increase of 11 percent and a US\$1,000 bonus. Union sources indicated that the strike would last until at least Tuesday, when both sides are scheduled to meet.

Last September, workers at the same plants and Volvo workers in the city of Curitiba carried out a strike for a week before reaching a negotiated agreement with factory owners.

## Hunger strike in Venezuela

Workers at the flour plant in Remavenca in the city of Umana in the Venezuelan state of Sucre will go on a hunger strike this week to demand that the employer obey their contract. Union leader Joel Level indicated that management has ignored workers' petition for wage parity between the workers at the plants at Cumana and those at the flour plant.

"We chose to go on a hunger strike because Mr. Mendoza has ignored us. He does not respect the right of equal pay for equal work, which is what the law required," declared the union leader.

Venezuela's food security and sovereignty laws prohibit strikes in plants that produce price-controlled foods, therefore, only three workers will go on the hunger strike while the rest will continue at their posts, said Level.

## Honduran high school teachers to strike this week

The Union of Honduran High School Teachers (COPENH) on

September 6 announced a two-day strike for September 7 and 8 to demand the return of President Manuel Zelaya. Zelaya was overthrown by a military coup on June 28.

The purpose of the protest strike is to show solidarity with the activities of the national front against the military coup. In a radio transmission, COPENH leaders reminded listeners that teachers have resisted the dictatorship throughout the 71 days and declared that the resistance will continue until democracy is returned to Honduras. COPENH also denounced government attempts to set up a parallel teachers' union.

## Strike at Michoacan vocational schools

Union workers at the Icatmi Vocational Schools in the state of Michoacan, Mexico, went on strike September 2. The workers are demanding a 40 percent wage increase and changes in their collective bargaining contract. The strike affects 213 vocational institutions across the state, where approximately 5,000 students learn equipment and automotive maintenance, carpentry, information technology, clothing design, and other vocational skills.

## Uruguay: Health care workers threaten strike

The Federation of Public Health Employees (FFSP), the union representing public employees in Uruguay, is studying a new proposal by the Administration of Government Health Services (ASSE). The public health non-medical workers carried out a 72-hour protest strike on September 3; they will resume the strike on September 8 if no agreement is reached.

The FSSP is demanding that ASSE implement a wage agreement signed last April. This agreement would have regularized the status of 9,000 temporary workers that work more than 36 hours a week. At the same time, the union is demanding transparent norms on health leave as well as the solution to a number of accumulated grievances.

## Washington state judge orders teachers to return to work

A King County Superior Court Judge ruled September 3 that Kent Education Association teachers must end their strike and return to their classrooms by September 8. The teachers have been striking for more than a week over class sizes and wages.

In response to a stipulation of the court order that forbids the union from advocating a continuation of the strike, local president Lisa Brackin-

Johnson said the union would only present the judge's decision to teachers and allow them to vote on whether or not to return to work. Brackin-Johnson told the *Covington Reporter*, "Oftentimes acts of civil disobedience have to occur to right a wrong."

The Washington state legislature has never passed a law that bars strikes by teachers. In her ruling, Judge Andrea Darvas said, "No court has ever held that public school teachers have a right to strike," and claimed the issue defaults to common law, which holds that strikes are illegal.

### **Chicago strike continues over dropped health insurance**

Workers at SK Hand Tool in Chicago, Illinois are into their second week on strike after the company unilaterally dropped health care coverage. Last May company head Claude Fuger dropped health care without notifying the 75 members of Teamsters Local 743. Since that time, many members have seen health care bills mount into the thousands and even tens of thousands of dollars.

On September 2, strikers dropped in on US Labor Secretary Linda Solis, who was in Chicago to make a Labor Day speech. Solis attempted to pass herself off as an ally of the workers by posing for pictures with strikers. She claimed she "knew all about the SK Tool strike and was looking into it," telling strikers her father had been a Teamster.

The old contract agreement between the Teamsters and SK Hand Tool expired back in February. At that time, there was no discussion of dropping health insurance. Instead, the company sought an overall 20 percent wage cut combined with a temporary \$4-an-hour wage cut during the contract's first six months. SK Hand Tool claims that a third-party unilaterally dropped the coverage and it merely passed this on to the workers.

### **Tugboat strike in New York Harbor**

The union representing tugboat workers called a strike over staffing levels against Kosnac, a small company operating two boats in New York Harbor. William Harrigan, president of Local 333 of the Local Marine Division of the International Longshoremen's Association, told the Associated Press that the company's demand to drop a deckhand and have engineers absorb the work as "suicide," saying current staffing levels amount to "skeleton crews."

Local 333 says any concession on its part would lead other unionized companies to ask for the same staffing levels. Kosnac management claims that nonunion companies are already operating with lower staffing, causing it to lose business to its competitors. They even charged Local 333 with not "organizing nonunion companies and enforcing existing contracts." The strike is the first tugboat work stoppage in nearly two decades.

### **Fatal explosion at Pennsylvania coke works**

An explosion September 3 at the Clairton Coke Works in southwestern, Pennsylvania killed Nicholas Revetta, 32, and injured a second contractor

working at the plant.

The 11:26 a.m. explosion caused a fire that could be seen throughout the town. The Coke producing facility is owned by US Steel and is one of three plants the company still operates in the Monongahela Valley.

The Allegheny County medical examiner's office said Revetta was pronounced dead at 12:19 p.m. at Jefferson Regional Medical Center in Jefferson Hills. Officials said the cause of death is yet to be determined.

According to a company spokesperson, Revetta was performing maintenance in a gas cleaning area at the time of the incident. The company has its own fire department, which responded to the explosion.

The blast occurred in one of two control rooms at the north end of the plant. The area contains piping through which hot gasses pass after the coke is baked.

### **Nuclear fuel workers strike**

One hundred thirty-seven workers at Cameco Fuel Manufacturing in Port Hope east of Toronto went on strike last Friday after rejecting the company's final offer by a 96 percent margin.

The striking members of the United Steel Workers' Union (USW) are employed building fuel bundles for the nearby Bruce Power nuclear generating facility and have been without a contract since June. Main issues in the dispute include wages, as well as disability and retirement benefits, where the company is seeking major concessions.

Cameco, which is the world's largest uranium producer, also sells fuel for nuclear reactors around the globe.

### **Edmonton grocery workers locked out**

After workers rejected the company's latest offer, Canada Safeway locked out more than 300 unionized employees at its Edmonton, Alberta distribution centre and at its ice cream plant as of Monday morning.

The workers are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union and have been working without a contract since last December. The strikers are facing a raft of concession demands from the company, including increasing the number of hours worked before overtime is paid from 37 to 40.

Canada Safeway is one of the largest grocery chains in Canada. The union has said that they see no quick resolution to the dispute and that they are prepared for a long strike if necessary.



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