

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 July 2010

## Argentina: Long-distance bus drivers announce 24-hour strike

UTA, Argentina's long-distance transport drivers union, announced a 24-hour work stoppage to take place on Thursday, July 8. The strike is a response to omnibus owners' refusal to pay an extension of a 700 peso (US\$178) monthly bonus while negotiations are taking place.

The Labor Ministry previously ordered the payments in order to avoid disruptions of service during the country's bicentennial festivities (see June 29 Workers Struggles). The owners, claiming that their voices were not being heard, announced they would not extend the payment into July, despite being ordered to by the Labor Ministry.

UTA Secretary General Roberto Fernández accused the owners of "bad faith," because, as he told *El Clarín*, "the government authorized a raising of the fare and gives them more diesel," but they "don't pay the sum of 700 pesos" that had been agreed upon at the beginning of the year. Fernández said that UTA demands that the lump sum be paid retroactive to January 2010, and that their claim includes "payment of travel allowances and Christmas bonuses."

## Paraguayan teachers to go on hunger strike over pay, budget issues

Federation of Educators of Paraguay (FEP) Director Carlos Parodi announced the teachers union's intention to go on a hunger strike beginning Monday, July 5, if the Treasury and Education Departments (MEC) do not agree to an increase in the budget.

In a radio interview, Parodi stated that the hunger strike would be a repudiation of the "supposed agreement signed by Dionisio Borda (Treasury) over the budget increase, a sum which is not established in the document." He noted that FEP teachers were expecting a salary hike and wanted the conflict settled before noon Monday.

According to the July 2 issue of *La Pauta*, "with respect to the agreement that the Treasury signed, Parodi indicated that it should appropriate 53 billion *guaraníes* (US\$11,323,818) that the Treasury proposed to the MEC as a budget increase." Parodi added, "They have us in a state of uncertainty."

He explained that the budget hike "is for teachers ad honorem and for raising the wages of other teachers."

FEP went on strike June 21, and as of Friday July 2, bargaining between the union and the MEC had not brought results.

## Chile: Hospital workers strike over salaries, conditions

Hospital workers at Amicam (Corporación de Amigos de Hospital Calvo Mackena) in Santiago, Chile, have struck the non-profit organization over salaries and conditions, and the director's intransigence

toward discussion of these issues. Lilliette Blanchard, treasurer of the hospital union, told *El Ciudadano*, "We had discussions, conversations, even a mediation through the Labor Inspector, but there was no response to our demands."

A communiqué issued by the union points out that the workers have not received a salary raise in 10 years. In addition, they accuse the hospital board of directors of abuses, such as the establishment of unattainable goals for call center operators and the refusal to give fuel vouchers for automobile commuters.

The workers told *El Ciudadano* that they would continue with the strike until they get an answer to their demands, addressing "the antiunion practices that motivate the workers not to unionize."

Alfredo Latorre, president of Corporación Amicam, responded that "we work so that the money goes to the children and we are not disposed to divert those funds." He claimed that the workers make 300,000 Chilean pesos (less than US\$560) per month; therefore their salary demands were not justified. Latorre was adamant about refusing to negotiate with the workers.

## Honduran taxi drivers union calls for strike

Taxi drivers in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa called for a suspension of service on Monday, July 5, to demand a compensatory bonus promised since last year. The National Congress had approved the disbursement of 440 million lempiras (US\$21 million) for urban service for the capital, but excluded city buses and other transportation services, Edilberto Robles, president of the Association of Taxis of Honduras (ATAXISH), told *El Tiempo*.

A month ago, the DGT (General Directorate of Transport) promised to make good on a promise of around 90 million lempiras (US\$4.76 million), but has not done so. Robles complained that this would be an incentive for private vehicles to be used to carry passengers. For this sorry state of affairs, a strike at the national level has been called for, he said.

Last Thursday, ATAXISH officials met with the Minister of Public Works, Transport and Housing, who offered a new proposal. Robles said, "We hope that...the offer will be concrete and convincing," and called for solidarity from taxi drivers who would benefit from an agreement, which he calculates at some 17,000.

## Mexico: Strike breaks out in El Cubo mine

Mineworkers at the El Cubo gold and silver mine in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato went on strike on June 30. This is the second time in 26 months that the mine, owned by Nova Scotia-based Gammon Gold, Inc., has been struck.

The mine has been the site of a prolonged labor struggle between

Gammon and the miners union SNTMMSRM, “as a consequence of the imposition of a 10-hour workday, the deaths of several miners and the demand for a share in the profits,” according to *El Universal*.

In April 2009, union workers initiated a strike over the 10-hour day and salary issues.

On June 15, Gammon announced the firings of 397 union miners and the filing of criminal charges against seven union functionaries. *Resource Investor* quoted Gammon president and CEO Rene Martin as claiming that “although the company continues to believe in the potential of this property...the board and management have a fiduciary responsibility to invest in operations that provide a positive rate of return for its shareholders.” The company said that the mine would now be placed “on care and maintenance.”

The firm has couched the ongoing conflict in terms of resistance by the union to attempts by the company to modernize mining techniques, introduce effective work schedules and improvements in mine safety performance. However, since March 2009, there have been eight deaths at El Cubo, and the Secretary of Labor, citing “incompletion of norms of operation and security,” fined Gammon and restricted access to three mines in May 2010 after a miner died from inhalation of toxic fumes.

### **Teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico, end work stoppage after four days**

On Friday, July 2, Section 22 of Mexico’s National Syndicate of Education Workers (SNTE) lifted a work stoppage and other mobilizations begun four days before. In addition, the vigil at Oaxaca’s central plaza, the Zócalo, held since May, was lifted.

Thousands of members of Section 22 blocked access to Benito Juárez International Airport beginning June 28. In addition, they blockaded the construction site of the auditorium of Cerro del Fortín, where the festival of La Guelaguetza attracts tourists from around Mexico and the world the last Monday in July.

The blockade of the 72-million-peso (US\$5.5 million) project followed voting in the last State Assembly of the teaching profession, which covers some 27,000 teachers in the Valles Centrales region.

Meanwhile, some 400 teachers in the Mixteca sector closed road access in Agua Dulce and Vista Hermosa, the first in Huajuapán-Mexico Highway 190 and the second-Oaxaca Huajuapán artery.

Gabriel Melitón Santiago, spokesman for SNTE section 22, told *El Universal* on the first day of the actions that the indefinite work stoppage and protests were the result of the lack of response to their political and social demands. Among the demands were cost of living allowances by zone, addition of positions, and cancellation of arrest warrants.

The state assembly agreed to hold regional mass marches as a sign of victory—despite no agreement having yet been reached—after having returned to the negotiating table Thursday afternoon.

### **Long Beach and Los Angeles port clerical workers strike**

Members of International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 63’s Office Clerical Unit (OCU) went on strike July 1 after negotiations with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) failed to produce a new three-year contract.

The OCU did not call for strike action at all locations, but only at four of the largest terminals, where picketers marched at the entrances, slowing the movement of container trucks. At all other locations—mostly in office

buildings located off the docks—it was “business as usual.”

Moreover, an arbitrator ruled that the clerical unit had bargained in bad faith, so other ILWU sectors like the longshoremen and marine clerks—numbering about 250 at the four terminals—are bound to cross picket lines under terms of their contracts.

On June 29, the next-to-last day before the expiration of the 2007 contract, OCU members unanimously granted strike authorization by voice vote at a special meeting attended by about 200 members of the 900-member local.

The primary issue is job security. Management wants to reduce the workforce by over 20 percent and have the ability to lay off more workers whenever they choose. In addition, they want to leave vacancies unfilled on the first day of an absence instead of having temps (union temporary workers sent by the local) fill the spots. The PMA is also demanding big hits in health care, retirement and holidays, and the introduction of technologies that would impact job security.

The PMA has already made inroads in these areas. Last year management used the economic downturn as a rationale for demanding more “flexibility” in the use of temps, more layoffs and job reductions through attrition. The union agreed to all of these measures, accepting management’s claim that they were only temporary. The result has been a steady reduction in jobs. Now management is demanding that these “temporary” measures be made permanent.

On economic issues, the PMA rejected the demand by the OCU for a 21 percent wage increase and has countered with a proposal of only 10 percent.

### **Heavy equipment construction workers strike Chicago area building projects**

Some 15,000 construction equipment operators walked off the job June 30 and brought work to a halt on the Eisenhower Expressway and dozens of other road and building projects in Chicago and the surrounding area. The Mid-American Regional Bargaining Association, which represents the construction companies, offered workers a one percent wage increase and reacted with hostility to the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 150’s demand for a 15 percent wage increase.

Tom Nordeen, chair for the employers association, demanded “shared sacrifice,” saying the strike would be “devastating to the economy.” The IUOE claimed the union’s 15 percent wage request was aimed at offsetting “the inflationary costs of healthcare.” The Laborers District Council pointed at the consequences of workers shouldering greater health care costs and said, “[W]hat they have come to the table with represents a significant cut to our members and jeopardizes the stability of our fringe benefit funds, and we will not settle for that.”

### **Quebec daycare workers take job action**

The union representing 12,500 home daycare workers in the province of Quebec has announced that workers will initiate a limited job action to step up pressure in first contract negotiations.

The Fédération des intervenantes en petite enfance du Québec (FIPEQ-CSQ) announced that as of Monday, July 5, daycare workers will start work two hours later than usual to pressure the government to take notice. Negotiations have been ongoing since February, and the Liberal

government now says no further talks will take place until the end of summer.

Home daycare workers make up about 40 percent of daycare workforce in the province and put in an average of over 60 hours a week at less than minimum wage.



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