

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Argentine contract rail workers block trains to protest firings

For nine hours on Wednesday, outsourced rail workers for the Roca railway line interrupted operations in the greater Buenos Aires city of Avellanada over firings of over 100 of their coworkers since October 2009. In addition to the reinstatement of the laid-off workers, the protesters demanded that the 1,500 so-called *tercerizados*, or contract workers, who make up nearly a fourth of the Roca line's workforce, be given permanent status.

Shortly before 11:00 a.m., according to El Clarín, a group of some 200 contract workers for Roca, a subsidiary of Trenes de Buenos Aires (TBA), cut service on rail lines at the Avellanada Constitution Station. They were protesting their nonpermanent status and their salaries—which are half those of workers directly employed by TBA—and demanding the reinstatement of the laid-off workers.

Service was paralyzed until 6:40 p.m., when the workers let a few lines through upon hearing that a delegation was holding a meeting at the office of the Undersecretary of Rail Transport. Shortly thereafter, they reinstated the blockades and police intervened to keep irate stranded passengers from confronting the protesters.

Around 8:30 p.m., a group of passengers and youth, some reportedly with rocks, clashed with police. One policewoman was injured and at least four people were arrested.

Uruguay: Home attendants fast to disaffiliate from health care workers federation

The Union of Attendants to the Sick is carrying out 48-hour rotating fasts to bring attention to their demand that they not be represented by the Uruguayan Health Federation (FUS) in Uruguay's Salary Board negotiations.

The union disaffiliated from FUS a year ago. FUS workers earn 27 pesos (US\$1.28) per hour on average and, as opposed to other functionaries in the health field, do care work that generally extends through an entire workday, as reported in *El Espectador*.

Members have been mobilized since March and “have had meetings

with authorities from the Public Health ministry, senators, lawyers, as well as taking their complaints to the workplace health commissions to both houses of congress,” notes the daily. Although they have requested a meeting with the labor minister, Eduardo Brenta, they have not yet received a reply.

There are 50 home care businesses in Uruguay. Attendants generally work shifts that last more than 12 hours, while the rest of the health employees have six-hour shifts. The attendants union notes that FUS does not acknowledge the needs of workers in their sector.

The National Union of Attendant Services Workers (Suntsa) has 1,200 members out of 6,000 workers in the country. Many of these workers do not earn the minimum wage. *El Espectador* reports that “it is estimated that there are 400,000 Uruguayans that use the service.”

The Labor Ministry is studying the possibility of including Suntsa in negotiations to bring agreements in line with FUS.

There are 10 workers currently carrying out the hunger strike in 48-hour shifts. They have stated that if they do not get a response to their complaints, they will sharpen the measures they take.

Mexican electrical workers end hunger strike

On July 23, a nearly three-month hunger strike by two members of the Mexican Electrical Workers' Union (SME) ended when the union agreed to hold high-level talks with the Ministry of the Interior. The 86- and 90-day hunger strikes were held as a protest against the dissolution of Mexico City's utility Luz y Fuerza and the sacking of its 44,000 workers in October 2009. CFE took over the utility, firing all but 7,000 of the workers.

About 17,000 workers rejected the severance package they were offered and staged a number of protests—including road blockages and the hunger strikes—demanding their reinstatement in the new entity.

Charges and countercharges have flown back and forth, with the union leadership accusing the government of meddling in union affairs and claiming it is a scapegoat for the government's insufficient investment in Luz y Fuerza. SME has also claimed it is being punished for its support for candidate Manuel López Obrador during the last presidential election, which Calderón won amidst charges of widespread election fraud.

An article in the *Montreal Gazette* reports: “The federal government and some commentators have accused the SME leaders of escalating the protests to unacceptable levels by attempting to martyr despondent

workers through hunger strikes in order to regain control of a labor empire that lacked transparency and collected monthly dues of approximately \$3 million.”

Both hunger strikers, Cayetano Cabrera and Miguel Angel Ibarra, deny they were pushed into their actions.

The agreement to open negotiations follows a July 7 Supreme Court that sustained the constitutionality of Calderón’s order liquidating Luz y Fuerza.

Mexican mine workers union denounces lack of safety at Cananea mine

A recent report from Local 65 of the Mexican miners union SNTMMSRM claims that a worker brought in by the Mexicana de Cananea mining company to replace striking miners in the northern Sonoran town fell about 15 feet in a severe accident. The nature of the worker’s injuries—or if the worker died—is unknown because the company refuses to release any news about him, according to the report. The local denounced the recent accident as part of a general pattern of flouting safety standards by the firm.

The Local 65 report identified the injured miner as Javier Guzmán, who “is not unionized, doesn’t have Social Security and was contracted as a ‘tercerista’; nonetheless he lacks experience and qualification for the job ... These contracts violate the Federal Labor Law, since the strike is in full force and by law it is prohibited to make new contracts until the labor stoppage is resolved.”

There are now over 3,500 *federales* in Cananea, some of whom escort “terceristas” (contract workers) or “esquiroles” (replacement workers) to the mines every day.

Last June, around 2,000 heavily armed federal police, backed up by helicopters, used tear gas to dislodge the union miners from the Cananea copper mine, which is owned by Mexicana de Cananea’s parent company Grupo Mexico, after a three-year strike at the mine over a number of issues including safety and health issues as well as the fate of union general secretary Napoleón Gómez Urrutia.

Gómez Urrutia has both supporters and opponents among mine workers, with supporters—including the United Steel Workers—claiming he is the victim of a government and corporate vendetta, and opponents accusing him of electoral fraud and embezzlement of over \$55 million. Faced with prosecution for corruption charges in 2006, Gómez Urrutia fled to Canada where he remains.

Mass arrests at Hyatt Hotels across North America

Hundreds of hotel workers and their supporters were arrested at civil disobedience demonstrations held at Hyatt Hotels in 15 cities in the US and Canada to protest stalled contract talks. Among the arrested were over 150 who sat down outside the Grand Hyatt Hotel in San Francisco, while another 41 were arrested at the Hyatt Regency in Indianapolis.

Various hotel chains, including Hyatt and Hilton, have been negotiating with the union UNITE HERE for nearly a year without reaching an agreement. Among the demands by Hyatt have been wage freezes that would lock in for five or six years, as well as hundreds of dollars in increases on health care benefits. Previously, Hyatt paid the full cost of health care.

The union has also been drawing attention to working conditions that make Hyatt one of the worst workplaces for injuries. The *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* published a study earlier this year that found housekeeping workers at Hyatt “have a risk of injury twice that of the company with lowest rates.”

Agreement to resume contract talks ends Quad Cities carpenters strike

Some 800 carpenters ended their four-day strike July 23 at construction sites across the Quad Cities in Iowa and Illinois and negotiations will resume this week. Local 104, representing carpenters in Iowa, and Local 166, which represents Illinois carpenters, have been working without a contract since May 1.

The two sides held 15 negotiation sessions since contract talks began back on March 31. The agreement that ended picketing this week did not resolve any contract issues, but merely laid the basis for a continuation of negotiations. No details on the status of economic issues were available.

Montreal dockworkers locked out

Eight hundred fifty longshoremen and women in Montreal, Quebec were locked out from July 18 to July 23 by the Maritime Employers Association (MEA), bringing shipping to a virtual halt in the country’s second largest port.

The lockout came as a surprise to union negotiators, who had been in talks up to the time of the lockout. Union leaders say they were about to cancel pressure tactics, such as refusal of overtime, in the hope of reaching an agreement and appealed to the MEA to allow workers to stay on the job.

Workers involved in the dispute, who are represented by the Syndicat des Debardeurs, which is part of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been without a contract since the end of 2008. Central issues in mediated negotiations include job security and wages.



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