

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Buenos Aires teachers stop work for 48 hours

Members of the Buenos Aires-based SUTEBA and UDOCBA teachers unions carried out a 48-hour strike September 1-2 as part of salary and other demands. On the first day, traffic was halted as demonstrators blocked streets in the city's downtown area and later on the Pueyrredón Bridge.

The educators decided upon the work stoppage at a plenary session of general secretaries that met on August 23. A communiqué from the union listed the demands as being a reworking of the salary structure, an initial base salary of 2,400 pesos (US\$600), hierarchical job titles, decent working conditions and labor stability.

A SUTEBA delegate, María Díaz Reck, said in a radio interview that the action was a repudiation of the "miserable" wage hike offer of 17 percent—signed last March—that had already been overtaken by inflation. "Nowadays we have to work in two or even three positions to reach the end of the month," she complained.

The unions and the Education Ministry differed on the compliance and effectiveness of the stoppage, with CGT federation general secretary calling the action "convincing" and Education Minister Mario Oporto dismissing the action as "minor." Oporto announced that the teachers' salaries would be deducted for the two days.

Díaz denounced Oporto and his counterpart in the Labor Ministry, Oscar Cuartango, about whom she told *Diario Popular*, "If he says that the salary discussion will not be reopened because of a political question, then that means that the resources are there but they are hidden behind a decision to generate uncertainty and a strong social cost among the teaching colleagues."

La Mexicana Airlines ground workers protest

Ground workers for airline Mexicana de Aviación, Mexico's largest airline, demonstrated peacefully Thursday in the Tampico terminal,

demanding that the enterprise—which suspended all flights on August 28 in the midst of bankruptcy proceedings—resume work and warning that they would not let it close down.

Twenty-three ground workers belonging to the National Syndicate of Transportation, Transformation, Aviation, Service and Related Workers (SNTTTAS) released a statement at 1:30 p.m. defending their rights. They pointed out that there are 9,000 passengers being carried monthly from the Tampico airport by its low-cost domestic service Click Mexicana, which is not involved in the bankruptcy filing.

Mexicana filed for bankruptcy on August 2, a day after suspending 31 flights in Mexico and the US. In 2009, its fleet of almost 70 planes carried over 11 million passengers to destinations in Europe and the Americas. However, the airline incurred massive debts and had seen its business fall off in the midst of the financial crisis and the H1N1 epidemic, both of which contributed to a dramatic fall-off of tourist and business travel.

In its bankruptcy filing, Mexicana claimed that it had piled up more than \$1 billion in debts. The airline blamed its woes primarily on its workforce, claiming that pilot and flight attendant salaries were much higher than those of its competitors.

Earlier this year the company had demanded that the unions renegotiate their contracts, with wage cuts and workforce reductions of about 40 percent. On July 1, in response to the wage-cut proposals, 500 Mexicana pilots and crew members protested and marched at Benito Juárez airport in Mexico City, where union spokespeople pointed out that they had already agreed to cuts in 2006.

The airline now faces a restructuring that would involve selling off portions to lower-cost providers. On August 30, representatives of SNTTTAS asked the federal government not to let the airline be "dismembered" and said that they will present a demand that the government find a "substitute owner and thus avoid 2,000 workers from their association ending up without work," as reported in *El Economista*.

Negotiations break down between Uruguayan government and state workers

The latest round of protracted negotiations between the state workers confederation COFE and the Uruguayan government broke down Thursday. Government negotiators held up an offer of a 500 peso (about US\$24) monthly payment that they had made at the beginning of the week because COFE would not accept a "syndical peace" (i.e., no-strike) stipulation until 2013 that the government had wanted in exchange.

COFE bargainiers have proposed that a new agreement for 2012 be negotiated next year.

COFE Secretary General Joselo López told *El Espectador* that if they do not arrive at an accord, they could denounce the government before the International Labor Organization (ILO) for breach of the collective bargaining process.

Juan Castillo, member of the executive board of the PIT-CNT labor federation, with which COFE is affiliated, called the latest turn of events “frustrating” and claimed that the government had taken the latest COFE offer off the table after having “generated an important expectation after the latest contacts that we had maintained since Tuesday morning... I was quite annoyed by the attitude of the government, which I believe was not helpful.”

COFE President Pablo Cabrera told the daily that he was “disillusioned” and that the federation would analyze steps to take if the dialogue with the government remains stalled.

Workers strike New Jersey commuter bus service

One hundred transit workers struck New Jersey’s DeCamp Bus Lines September 2 to oppose wage and benefit concessions. DeCamp is seeking to freeze pensions, cap wages, implement a lower-tier wage for new hires starting at \$8 an hour, and wipe out defined pensions by substituting inferior 401(k)s. Management has announced it will unilaterally impose a new medical plan on October 1.

On the second day of the strike police intervened when a fight broke out on the picket line in Montclair. According to pickets, a manager engaged in verbal attacks on workers and then physically struck one.

The union, which represents drivers, mechanics, cleaners and clerks, has been seeking to substitute a 45-cent wage increase in place of the \$1,000 lump sum bonus offered by management and wants to improve medical benefits. The company and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1317 have been involved in negotiations for a year and a half while the old agreement expired as far back as September of 2009. DeCamp provides bus service for about 8,000 commuters from several locations across northern New Jersey to New York City.

Staffers for Ohio teachers union go on strike

The 109 staff workers for the Ohio Education Association (OEA) walked off the job September 1 after bargaining failed to resolve issues ahead of the contract’s expiration. Back in July, the Professional Staff Union, which represents about half of the OEA’s staff in offices in Columbus and at 25 field offices across the state, filed an unfair labor practices charge against the OEA charging the teachers union had refused to bargain in good faith.

In a written statement Norm Young, president of the Professional Staff Union, stated, “It’s just plain embarrassing for us, and probably for many OEA members, that we have to be put in this situation of a union striking a union. Our PSU members have to deal regularly with difficult school boards and school administrators around the state. It’s as if OEA officers and administrators think they have to impersonate the worst of them in the way they treat us. It’s simply the rankest form of hypocrisy.”

Behind the calculations of the OEA bureaucracy is an anticipated decline in members’ dues pending anticipated layoffs from the state’s inability to cover \$8 billion in its budget. For others in the labor bureaucracy there is fear that the strike will cut the legs out from under their support to the Democratic Party in the fall elections, as the OEA’s staff plays a major role in carrying out their campaign obligations.

Hotel workers call one-day actions

Hotel workers in California, Hawaii, Indiana, Massachusetts and Canada called one-day strike actions last week against Hyatt hotels, charging the chain with reducing staff causing increased injury rates and utilizing the recession to impose permanent concessions. In Los Angeles, where 5,000 hotel workers at various hotel chains have been without contracts for seven months, Unite Here Local 11 struck the West Hollywood Andaz on September 1.

In Chicago, contracts for 8,000 hotel workers expired on August 31, 2009. There the union struck the Hyatt Regency O’Hare in Rosemount on September 3. There was also a strike earlier in the week at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel & Towers.

Hyatt’s cash flow for the first fiscal quarter of 2010 increased by 17.1 percent over that of a year ago to \$247 million. Besides Hyatt, Unite Here is currently in contract negotiations with Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc. and Hilton Worldwide.

Film festival hotel workers stage strike

One hundred forty workers at the Hyatt Regency hotel, which will headquarter the upcoming Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in downtown Toronto, held a one day strike September 3 after a midnight deadline passed without reaching a deal.

Their union, Unite Here, says that while the recession is supposedly over, hotel industry management is treating workers as though it weren’t. Workers report that cuts to staffing levels have meant that many now do work that was previously done by two or three workers and that wages in many cases are just above the legal minimum.

The plight of hotel workers has drawn widespread support, as shown in a mass rally held on Saturday in front of the hotel. Union leaders sent a letter to TIFF organizers explaining that over the summer they have shown restraint at other Toronto hotels positioned to strike, most notably

during the G20.

Violence against striking New Brunswick hotel workers

Over 100 workers at the Delta Hotel in Saint John, New Brunswick went on strike August 28 and since that time four have reportedly been hit by cars at the parking garage where they are picketing.

The strikers are members of the United Steelworkers union, which says that they are fighting for improvements in wages, benefits and working conditions. Talks have broken off and are not expected to resume any time soon.

At least one of the strikers, a waitress at the hotel, required hospitalization for her injuries and the union has filed complaints with police, who say they are investigating the incident.

Packaging workers locked out in Peterborough

Thirty-eight workers at packaging company Genpak in Peterborough, Ontario east of Toronto were locked out August 26 and have been on the picket line at the company gates since then.

The workers had given their union, the Communications Energy and Paperworkers (CEP), a strong strike mandate two weeks prior to the lock out, but union leaders opted not to call workers out. As a result it will take two weeks before they are eligible for strike pay.

The one outstanding issue in negotiations is pensions, with the company demanding they substitute the existing defined pension plan which guarantees a monthly payment, with one prone to market fluctuations.



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