

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 December 2010

Argentine dockworkers lift blockade of Paraguayan shipments

A months-long blockade of Paraguayan shipments by the Argentine dockworker's union, SOMU, was called off on December 13 after the union agreed to a five-day truce. The embargo of river shipments to and from Paraguay was called in support of Paraguayan dockworkers, whose negotiators are engaged in collective bargaining talks with shipping companies.

River traffic accounts for about 80 percent of cargo to and from the landlocked country. The Paraguayan dockworkers union, SOMUPA, is affiliated with SOMU, and the blockade was initiated as an effort to break the deadlock in protracted negotiations between SOMUPA and shipping companies.

The Paraguayan government abandoned weeks of low profile diplomacy and threatened not to attend the Mercosur summit beginning December 16 if the Argentine government—which had claimed that the issue was purely a labor dispute—did not intervene to get cargo moving again.

The *Buenos Aires Herald* reports that, "The conflict affected over thirty Paraguayan shipping firms, which employ over 3,000 workers in the port of Buenos Aires and that of the Paraná River port, through which Paraguay transports its goods."

Argentina: Railway workers lift strike at Buenos Aires commuter line

Service on one of Buenos Aires' main commuter lines was reopened after workers suspended their strike December 16. The machinists' section of La Fraternidad (the Brotherhood) railway union lifted their strike when the union reached an agreement with national authorities.

The machinists took the action to protest the recent occupation by hundreds of homeless families of a property near a terminal. The families "oppose receiving subsidies from the authorities and demanded a livable solution," according to a *La Nacion* report.

The machinists claimed there was a "lack of guarantee" of security resulting from the "invasion of the operative zone" by the families.

A spokesman from the families told Canal TN news, "We are peaceful people; we're tired of promises. We don't want to negotiate a possible move, a plan for housing or subsidies, but we want a plot of land to be our home."

Union spokesman Horacio Caminos told *El Argentino*, "A document was signed between La Fraternidad and the UOFE-San Martin and the entity (the machinists) suspending the measure for a term of five days, demanding security measures and total dislodging of the operative zone." However, Caminos claimed, "We don't want to instigate violence of the poor against the poor."

Chilean public service union ends strike, accepts original wage offer

Three weeks after rejecting a proposed government wage hike of 4.2 percent as inadequate and launching an intermittent strike, Chile's public employees' union, ANEF, called its members back to work on Thursday.

The rightwing Piñera government's original offer was 3.7 percent, raised to 4.2 percent after ANEF lowered its initial demand of 8.9 percent to "more than 5 percent." The raise affects not only over 300,000 ANEF members, but some 200,000 police and military personnel who do not belong to the union.

ANEF called for a national strike while the lower house of the national legislature, the Chamber of Deputies, debated the proposed raise. The lower house, in which Piñera's National Renewal Party holds sway, voted in favor of the 4.2 percent figure, which is included in the 2011 budget. The bill then moved to the Senate, where the opposition "center-left" Concertacion coalition holds a slim majority.

Meanwhile, workers demonstrated in cities across Chile, with 40,000 marching to the Plaza de la Constitution in Santiago.

The Senate voted in favor of the budget by a margin of 44-43, according to an *Efe* report, "thanks to the absence of lawmaker and Socialist Party chairman and Concertacion member Osvaldo Andrade, who said he abstained from the vote at the request of union members anxious for a settlement that would ensure a Christmas bonus and some kind of pay increase.

Andrade was criticized by union officials and other opposition legislators, with some expressing doubts about the continuation of the Concertacion.

This defeat did not stop union official Claudio Gonzalez from saying at a press conference in Santiago: "We end this mobilization with our head held high, standing and not on our knees."

Panamanian airline workers threaten strike

Workers for Copa Airlines at Tocumen airport in Panama City have threatened to strike during Christmas week if their demands for better working conditions and job security are not addressed. The workers are members of the National Union of Aviation Industry workers, to which over 1,400 Copa workers belong.

In October, the union filed a complaint against Copa with 11 points of contention, including the firing of 14 employees without cause, creating a difficult work environment and not providing adequate transportation for workers who get off work late at night.

So far, only four of the eleven issues have been resolved. Meetings are planned through December 22. In a notice of intent filed with the Ministry of Labor, the union will strike on the morning of December 23.

Mexico City firefighters declare “active stoppage” over nonpayment of wages

Firefighters in Mexico City’s 16 fire stations declared an “active stoppage” (paro activo) on the morning of December 16 because they have not been paid for the last 15-day pay period and they have not received promised Christmas bonuses.

The firemen blocked traffic near their respective fire stations intermittently, causing traffic to back up on some of the capital’s main roads.

Federal District subsecretary of government Juan José García Ochoa told *El Universal* that representatives of the firefighters’ union and the government had met and reached an understanding. García Ochoa claimed that there had been “a problem of an administrative character,” but “it is resolved and the payments will be in the payrolls” at 12:00.

Veracruz health workers stop work over delayed wages

At least 35,000 health service workers in the Mexican state of Veracruz stopped work on December 15 to denounce the state government over nonpayment of a month’s wages, a Christmas bonus and a special end-of-year bonus.

The health workers paralyzed operations in institutions, clinics and administrative offices to demand that state authorities cover the money owed to them as required by law. The Secretary of Health, Pablo Anaya Rivera, admitted to *Proceso* that the department did not have the funds to make the payments. The federal government has not yet deposited the money in the state, according to state government spokespeople.

Anaya asked the workers to “have a little patience, since the money should arrive today or tomorrow.”

Jamaican hospital workers strike over pay delays

Janitor and portering service workers, protesting delays in payment of their salaries, temporarily struck Mandeville Regional Hospital in the Jamaican west-central parish of Manchester on December 14. Their pay had been due the previous Friday, but was delayed as had previously occurred before.

Another of the host of issues that the workers have with the LAMASA company, which contracts janitorial services to several hospitals and businesses in Jamaica, is lack of proper equipment. Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) island supervisor George Nicholas told the *Jamaica Observer* that, “They can’t take any more of this man. This is too much...”, referring to the hospital’s lack of response despite “constant bickering” that had gone on between the workers and the employees.

In the morning, a number of workers demonstrated with handmade signs saying “We want our pay now!” and “We want our money!” and similar messages. Later that day, hearing that LAMASA had deposited their money in the bank, the workers stopped their protest and returned to the job.

The company and BITU reps scheduled a meeting at the Ministry of Labour in the capital Kingston later that day.

Virgin Islands firefighters vote to file restraining order against union president

Alleging a number of offenses against the membership, members of the International Association of Firefighters Local 2125 of St. Thomas-St. John voted to file a restraining order against their president Andre Dorsey on December 16.

Among the allegations against Dorsey are his refusal to hold elections after the expiration of his term in 2009, refusal to reveal the state of the local’s finances since 2007, when he was elected and failure to negotiate in good faith a support staff contract in 2008.

A group of 18 members—three more than a quorum—met on December 14 and voted unanimously for a motion “that a temporary restraining order be filed immediately to stay any further expenditures from the union account and to have all dues collected by the Department of Finance be held in abeyance until this matter is settled,” Linda Herbert, an administrative assistant with the V.I. Fire Service, told *Virgin Islands Daily News*.

The Public Employees Relations Board (PERB), replying to an unfair labor practice complaint filed by union members against Dorsey in October, “has ordered all parties to provide a list of all possible witnesses that may testify in a hearing and is asking them to provide a written statement of relevant issues of fact and law by Dec. 23,” according to the *Daily News* report.

In a Nov. 30 letter to PERB, Dorsey stated, “I will not be available to fully comply with your order by Dec. 23, 2010, because of personal obligations that I will have through Dec. 31, 2010.”

One-day strike at Chicago Hilton hotel

Workers at Hilton’s Palmer House hotel in Chicago, Illinois carried through a one-day strike December 16 to protest stalled contract talks. The 500 members of Unite Here Local 1 who took part in the strike have been without a contract since August of 2009 and oppose Hilton’s attempt to increase workloads and slash healthcare benefits.

Workers are indignant that the Hilton received a \$320 million bailout—\$180 million which was not repaid—supposedly to save jobs. Instead, the hotel chain has been using the recession as a blunt instrument to drive down employees’ living standards and working conditions.

The Hilton issued a statement in response to the strike, saying, “Union tactics, such as work stoppages and demonstrations, will do nothing to bring us closer to a new contract. They are harmful to employees, to the hospitality industry and to the city of Chicago. Instead of taking actions that will drive business out of Chicago, Local 1 should return to the bargaining table so that we can resolve our differences.”

Hilton Worldwide was acquired by the Blackstone Group in 2007 in one of the last acquisitions through leveraged buyouts and distressed assets before the onset of the recession.

La Habra, California teachers return to work without contract

Teachers from the La Habra City School District in Orange County, California returned to the classroom December 18, some ten days after

going on strike against unilateral cuts in pay and benefits were imposed. The strike was sparked in the wake of a decision by the school district to impose two percent pay cuts and other concessions on November 1.

The two sides had been negotiating for more than a year. The district said it imposed the contract due to California's budget crisis. Education Association representatives said they would accept the cuts, but wanted contract language stating the cuts would be rescinded once the state budget is stabilized, something the district has declined to do.

Teachers had agreed to return to work on December 14, but when they arrived at their schools district officials attempted to coerce them into signing documents pledging they no longer wanted to be on strike and would not withhold teaching services. Under advisement from the union, teachers refused to sign. It took another four days before the two sides could get teachers back to work.

Currently, no new talks are scheduled and the La Habra Education Association has announced that it is filing a lawsuit against the district.

City workers to strike in Quebec

Around 400 outside municipal workers in Sherbrooke, Quebec, east of Montreal, are scheduled to go on strike on December 26. However their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has said that it will be a limited action, with an end date of January 7 set in advance.

In limiting the term of the strike, CUPE has made clear that this action is little more than a token protest aimed at allowing workers to vent their anger as negotiations drag on. The union has agreed in advance that what it considers essential services will be maintained during the strike. The workers have been without a contract for almost three years, during which time their union has undertaken similar, but smaller, protest actions on numerous occasions. Those actions involved workers in sewage, snow removal, garbage collection, engineering and parks and recreation, among others. Main issues in dispute are the number of defined permanent jobs, and demands for a compressed workweek and demands by the city for a seven-year contract.



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