

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 July 2011

Argentine public health workers hold three-day strike over salary demands

Workers in Argentina's state food and animal health sector—who inspect and certify food cargo for export—went on strike on July 18, delaying export shipments of grain and soybeans from the nation's ports. The workers, members of the National Agroalimentary Health and Quality Service, or Senasa, were supported by administrative and technical personnel.

The action halted the loading of soybeans, which have just been harvested, and corn, which is near the conclusion of its harvest. Cargo vessels in the important agricultural shipping hub Rosario were detained for lack of certificates allowing them to leave. The shipment of byproducts like oil and flour was not affected.

Two demands were behind the strike: a salary hike and the payment of additional sums that were anticipated in the new contract, which have stalled in negotiations. A spokesman for the State Workers Association (ATE), with which Senasa is affiliated, claimed more than 98 percent compliance with the walkout. The strike followed a three-day action the week before.

On Wednesday, the strike was suspended while negotiators returned to negotiations.

Chilean mineworkers walk out over wages and bonuses

Some 2,300 workers at Chile's Escondida mine indefinitely extended a 24-hour strike begun July 22 over wage and bonus issues. The workers have seen their monthly production bonus decrease from 300,000 pesos (US\$650) to 90,000 (US\$195) in the last 10 months.

Spokesmen for the mine, which is owned by Anglo-Australian consortium BHP Billiton, claim that the copper is not as pure as previously, thus forcing the reduction in the bonuses. However, union director José Vidal told *Terra* that the demands represented only about 0.58 percent of the company's profits.

Regional mining secretary Rodrigo Mendiburu called on the workers to drop the strike, asserting that the strike is illegal and that the mining company had every right to take legal action.

The strike came just a week after a one-day walkout at the state-owned Codelco complex and coincided with 12-hour weekend stoppages at BHP's Saraji mine in Australia.

Preliminary agreement at Colombian oilfields follows strike,

blockades and riots

After a month of labor unrest at the Pacific Rubiales oil firm in Colombia's eastern Meta province, representatives of the USO oil workers union and the company reached a preliminary agreement on July 19. The 20,000-member USO is affiliated with the Unitary Workers' Central (CUT) federation, which has arranged to meet this week with government and company officials to discuss the workers' grievances.

The catalyst for the disturbances was the firing last month of 1,000 contract workers by Cepcolsa, a subsidiary of Spanish firm CEPESA, which partners with Pacific Rubiales. In the weeks that followed the sackings, workers struck and blockaded oilfields in the city of Puerto Gaitán.

Last week, violence broke out when riot police attacked protesters, with injuries reported on both sides, and a number of trucks and other vehicles set aflame as well.

Brazil: municipal workers return to work after two-week strike

Municipal workers in the Brazilian prefect of Salvador returned to the job on July 21 from a strike that began July 7. The employees had stayed out despite a judge's declaration of the strike as "illegal and abusive" on July 15. In addition, the judge imposed a fine of R\$5,000 (US\$3,217) on the Salvador Prefecture Public Servants Union, Sindseps, for each day the workers stayed out.

Throughout the strike, Sindseps complied with a law that requires 30 percent of the workforce to remain at work "to attend to essential services and emergencies," according to a *Correio* report.

The walkout was sparked by the prefecture's rejection of workers' demands for a 40 percent wage hike. Workers picketed and blocked some worksites, leading to the judge's declaration that the strike was impeding access for non-striking employees. On July 18, protesters occupied the Council Chamber, remaining until July 21, when the prefecture threatened to bring in the police.

Bolivian hospital workers strike for 48 hours

Employees at the Cochabamba Hospital in the central Bolivian city of the same name struck for 48 hours on July 21 and 22. The strike call arose from the chronic lack of medicine and supplies, according to the secretary general of the workers' union, Lucinda Crespo.

Crespo named gloves, essential medications, antibiotics, fever reducers, iodized alcohol and gauze as among the items in short supply or nonexistent. She also pointed out the lack of photoelectric plates for taking x-rays, paper for ultrasound scans and chemical reactives for lab work.

A spokesperson for the mayor's office admitted to delays in the delivery of the supplies, but maintained that some had been delivered and others were on the way.

Workers blockaded Aroma Avenue at about 10:30 a.m. on July 21 and marched to Cochabamba's central Plaza 14 de Septiembre, where they vowed to extend the strike if their demands were not met.

Five-day strike by Costa Rican health workers ends

Health workers at the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS) walked out July 19 over a number of issues including unpaid overtime and benefits, a 40 percent reduction of disability payments and the acute financial crisis at the state institution, for which the CCSS workers' union, Undeca, demanded an accounting.

Although Undeca claimed 90 percent adherence to the action, the initial number of striking workers amounted to little over 4,000, representing a small percentage of the 48,000-strong workforce. This lackluster showing encouraged CCSS to hold firm. Rather than a blanket outlawing of the strike, the health minister ordered the workers back and said she would turn over the names of strikers for prosecution.

There were a few places in which striking hospital workers disrupted traffic and access to hospitals and clinics, but the impact was minimal. The National Association of Public Employees (ANEP) called on other unions to join a march on July 21, but it had little effect. On Friday, union representatives went into negotiations, which ended with the announcement of an agreement on Saturday.

Virgin Islands: legislative staff submit petition against pay cuts

A recently passed law that was ostensibly crafted to prevent firings of government employees in the Virgin Islands has sparked a protest petition by the legislature's central staff employees. The measure, due to take effect on July 28, will cut salaries for all government employees by 8 percent.

Virgin Islands Governor John deJongh Jr. had threatened to sack 600 government workers in fiscal year 2011 and another 800 in FY 2012 in order to eliminate a \$17.4 million budget deficit. The pay cut was offered as an alternative. As the *Virgin Islands Daily News* reported July 19, "The governor signed the bill into law July 5, and said the pay cuts eliminated the need to send government workers home—for now."

The petition, which contained 74 signatures, states, "The imposition of the eight percent salary reduction will result in undue hardships for many employees, many of whom have to work second jobs to support their families. We also view the imposition of an eight percent reduction as grossly unfair and inequitable, particularly to those employees earning lower wages." The petition asks for the repeal of

the law.

Rank-and-file government employees have broadly opposed the pay cuts; for example, two law enforcement unions have filed lawsuits challenging their legality. The legislative employees, however, are not unionized and petition signers have been tight-lipped about the identities of the originators.

One-day strike at Hyatt Hotels

Hotel workers staged one-day protests, including demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes, on July 21 at selected Hyatt Hotels across the United States over conditions facing housekeeping staff. The action involved workers at Hyatt Hotels in nine cities: Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, San Antonio, Phoenix, Los Angeles and Honolulu.

UNITE-HERE, the union at Hyatt, said the actions were to protest management abuse, including the replacement of career housekeepers with workers earning the minimum wage. Housekeepers at some Hyatt hotels clean as many as 30 rooms a day, double what is usually required at unionized hotels.

In Chicago, where Hyatt workers are still without a contract after two years of negotiations, housekeeping staff staged a one-day strike. Hyatt management turned on heat lamps to harass pickets under conditions of a severe heat wave. "We immediately starting sweating," one picket told the press. "It got hot really fast."

In San Francisco, police arrested nearly 80 people after a protest in front of the Grand Hyatt Union Square.

Agreement reached ending Iowa lockout

The union representing workers at a Keokuk, Iowa, grain milling plants says it has reached an agreement ending a 10-month lockout. Roquette America locked out 240 members of Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union, Local 48G in September last year after workers rejected several contract proposals.

The new agreement will not expire until September 2015. Company officials said workers will return in early August. Management continued production using strikebreakers during the lockout.



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