

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Mexican maquiladora workers return to work after five-day strike

Six hundred-fifty workers at steel pipe manufacturer Shaw's plant in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico returned to the job August 9 after five days on strike.

The week before, the company fired two employees and gave them only 10 percent of the severance pay it owed to them. The workers stopped work and demanded they be given the full 100 percent, which Shaw later did. They demanded the dismissal of the plant director as well.

Other concerns of the workers include safety—the work involves soldering and welding equipment—lack of proper tools, ventilation and protective equipment. Job security looms large as well; Maquiladoras in Mexico are notorious for packing up and leaving at the first sign of labor unrest.

Officials of the Day Laborers, Industrial and Maquiladora Workers Union (SJOIIM) originally attempted to portray the strike as a short “suspension” of work, and were eager to get the workers back to work. By the third day, they entered into tripartite talks with management and Labor Ministry negotiators.

When they finally called the workers back, one official told *El Manana* the important thing was to “start work up again, in order subsequently to continue with the revisions to be able meanwhile to find better conditions.” As for the director, *El Manana* notes, “he pointed out that it does not fall to the union to make such petitions.”

Honduran medical interns end strike

About 70 resident medical students at the Hospital Escuela (school hospital)—Honduras's principal health care services center located in San Pedro Sula—returned to their duties on August 10 after a two-day

strike. Emergency services were not struck during the stoppage.

The students struck over six points that they presented in a petition to the hospital's director, the dean of the medical school, vice-minister of health Javier Pastor and other officials.

Two of the points concern the monthly scholarship. The students are postgraduates working to gain experience in their chosen specialties. They receive a scholarship of 10,000 lempiras (US\$533) per month, which they have not received for the last two months. They also petitioned that the scholarship be raised to 15,000 (US\$800).

Complaints included inadequate uniforms for emergency work, the scarcity of secure parking spaces in the facility (only 15 are allotted for students) and the conduct of a security employee, whom they accused of being rude and of maltreating patients.

The students returned to work after they were told that they would receive the back pay and that their other issues would be addressed. They agreed to postpone the issue of the raise until next year.

Venezuelan slaughterhouse workers strike

Eighty-seven workers at the Municipal Slaughterhouse of Villa de Cura in the Venezuelan municipality of Zamora walked out on August 8 over salary and other issues. The workers assert that they have not seen any of the benefits promised by mayor Aldo Lovera, who took over the company last year.

In addition, the workers complain of unsanitary workplace conditions, verbal abuse and intimidation by management. They also claim that labor inspectors made several appointments to speak with the boss about the problems, but he did not show up.

Two union representatives were detained on August 8, to be released two days later. Lovera has brought in scabs to work at the slaughterhouse.

Partial strike by Venezuelan public transport drivers

Public transport unions carried out a partial strike August 11 for a few hours in Caracas and in 14 other Venezuelan states. The strike was lifted after government and union negotiators arrived at an agreement that day.

The main issues in the strike were growing lack of security for drivers and the delay in the subsidy for student tickets to which the government had agreed earlier. Venezuela currently has one of highest murder rates in the region.

Erick Zuleta, president of the National Transport Federation, recommended a decree prohibiting weapons on public transport. He reiterated that if more drivers die the protests would continue. "They are killing us," he told reporters, pointing out that over 200 drivers have died at the hands of the *hampa* (underworld) so far this year, and that thieves also steal from riders. "The constitutional right to protest legitimizes our taking to the street to defend the right to life," Zuleta said.

Artists union warns Lyric Opera of Chicago preparing lockout

The American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) sent a letter to its members who work for the Lyric Opera of Chicago stating that the company is preparing an August 22 lockout unless the union grants concessions. Alan Gordon, AGMA's national executive director, says that Lyric Opera is demanding the union shorten its work schedule by two weeks and cut wages, benefits and safety provisions or face a lockout.

The union is threatening to picket an upcoming free concert at Millennium Park on September 10. The old four-year agreement, which covers singers, chorus members, dancers, actors and production staff, expired on April 30.

Auction house Sotheby's locks out Teamsters

New York auction house Sotheby's locked out 43 art handlers represented by Teamsters Local 814 after contract negotiations between the two sides ground to a halt back on August 2. Sotheby's management demanded concessions that included several full-time positions be converted to nonunion part-time positions. The auction house has moved to bring in replacement workers during the lockout.

In 2010, Sotheby's had a net income of \$161 million while consolidated sales were up 74 percent from the previous year. Meanwhile, the pay of CEO William Ruprecht more than doubled, to \$6 million.

New York restaurant workers strike over anti-union harassment

Some 60 hospitality workers at the Central Park Boathouse

Restaurant walked off the job August 9 to protest abuses by restaurant management. Employees charge owner Dean Poll with breaking federal labor law by using a campaign of harassment, intimidation and firings to block workers for unionizing with the Hotel Trades Council.

The Hotel Trades Council filed a suit with the National Labor Relations Board back in February. The NLRB is still investigating some 10 complaints against Poll.

Ontario railcar workers strike

Railway-manufacturing workers in Thunder Bay, Ontario, who went on strike for three days last week against Montreal-based Bombardier Inc., are voting on a new contract that could return them to work this week.

The 700 workers at the Thunder Bay plant, which manufactures railway and subway cars, are members of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) and had been working without a contract since the end of May. Among other issues, company demands for cuts to pensions are at the centre of the dispute.

While details of the new deal have not been released, during negotiations the union expressed dismay with other sweeping demands for cuts by the company, which they note was just awarded a \$1.2 billion contract to build light rail cars for Toronto's transit system.

Montreal newspaper locks out workers

The *Montreal Gazette* last week locked out around 20 full- and part-time workers after they rejected the company's latest contract offer over issues of staffing and overtime provisions.

The workers affected include mailers and plate-makers, but four other bargaining units affiliated with the same union, the Teamsters, continued on the job after approving their own contracts. The company has said they will continue operations uninterrupted throughout the lockout.



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