

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 August 2011

## Argentine teachers strike

Teachers in Argentina's northern Chaco province struck over salary demands August 18. The educators, who are members of the SITECH teachers' federation, came from various parts of Chaco and gathered in the city of Quitilipi, where they repudiated the latest proposal of the minister of education, Francisco Romero.

Chaco is the third-poorest province in Argentina, with per capita income around half the national average. Inflation is currently at 6 percent. Teachers struck last March over their miserable wages, but after their union, ANTECH, went into binding arbitration, Romero claims the teachers emerged with good raises.

Speakers at the Quitilipi rally told another story. Romero was denounced as a "liar who doesn't keep his word, trying to confuse us with deceptive figures." Romero called the strike "a dead-end street" and said that the teachers "go on strike just to go on strike."

SITECH claimed 90 percent adherence to the stoppage. In an assembly in Quitilipi, the teachers decided to carry the strike into the next week.

## Buenos Aires metro workers stage three-hour work stoppage

Argentina's Labor Ministry ordered binding arbitration over a conflict that precipitated a three-hour work stoppage August 19 on one of Buenos Aires's busiest underground mass transit lines, the B Line.

The stoppage was called by the UTA union over "indiscriminate suspensions" of personnel. The transit company, Metrovías, had summoned some ticket booth workers regarding "suspected irregularities," suspended them and made them leave the premises.

The stoppage occurred at peak hours, affecting thousands of commuters and causing partial delays. Later, UTA delegates, accompanied by the suspended workers, decided to attend binding arbitration ordered by the Labor Ministry and called off the action.

UTA is threatening a strike until there is a response from Metrovías, according to a *Página/12* report. The daily added, "The conflict is owing to the lack of money [from fares] and the opening of the turnstiles by the workers to avoid conflicts with passengers."

## Brazilian construction workers walk off job at soccer stadium

Over 1,500 workers at Rio de Janeiro's Maracanã Stadium stopped work on August 17 over monetary and benefit demands. The workers

have been remodeling the 61-year-old stadium, known as the "Soccer Temple" and the probable site for the 2014 World Cup playoffs.

The workers walked off the job after a barrel—formerly used to store combustibles—exploded, causing injuries to a worker. The striking workers are demanding better and safer workplace conditions. In addition, they want an increase in the current monthly financial aid allotment for basic foodstuffs, from 110 reais (US\$69) to 300 (US\$187). Lastly, they are demanding health insurance from the consortium that has the remodeling contract.

The consortium, made up of construction firms Odebrecht, Delta and Andrade Gutiérrez, called the explosion "an isolated incident" and claimed that the consortium "rigorously" follows all labor and safety laws. It acceded to the demand to offer health insurance, but offered a 9.2 percent adjustment to the food allowance instead of the amount demanded by the workers. The workers rejected the proposal on Friday and voted to continue the strike.

## Chilean government attorneys strike against "overload"

District attorneys in Chile's Public Ministry struck for five hours throughout the country August 17 to protest the government's refusal to alleviate the extreme workloads they labor under and to raise their salaries. In Santiago, dozens of attorneys and office employees beat casserole pans, carried signs and chanted in front of the ministry building. The actions were replicated countrywide.

According to the attorneys, the judicial reforms of the last decade were designed to attend to 800,000 cases per year, whereas the actual number exceeds 1.5 million. The ministry needs at least 180 new attorneys and 800 auxiliary personnel to be able to carry out its functions, according to the Public Ministry functionaries' director, Natalia Céspedes, who described the situation as "on the brink of collapse."

This is the second partial strike in a month to demand more resources. There was a similar stoppage toward the end of July.

## Honduran health workers suspend strike action

A strike in Tegucigalpa by employees of the Honduran health sector called for August 19 was suspended following a promise by the Health Secretariat to pay up to four months in back wages.

Actions began as planned, when in the early hours workers at the city's health centers stopped work. At about 10:00 they assembled in

front of the Health Secretariat to demand the overdue wages. Within a few minutes, authorities promised that the disbursements would be forthcoming the next week.

Protest leaders told *La Tribuna* that they would wait until Tuesday for the Secretariat to make good on its promise; if not, they would call for new mobilizations.

### **Jamaican taxi and bus operators strike over harassment**

Over 150 taxi and bus operators in the southeast Jamaican parish of St. Catherine struck in protest over mistreatment by the Transport Authority (TA). Services were withdrawn in Linstead, Bog Walk and Spanish Town.

The strike is part of the operators' continuing demand for the removal of TA head Daniel Dawes, under whose direction they are being "harassed and targeted unnecessarily" by inspectors.

A group of taxi operators assembled in Bog Walk to carry picket signs and call for Dawes to be sacked. The actions took place a week after similar strikes in Manchester and St. Elizabeth.

### **Illinois teachers strike over effort to impose random drug testing**

Teachers for the Illini Bluffs Community Unit School District 327 near Peoria, Illinois walked out on strike over an attempt by the local school board to impose a random drug testing policy. Economic issues between the district and the Illinois Bluffs Federation of Teachers, which represents the 60 striking teachers, have largely been settled in the current round of contract talks.

The teachers responded to the board's demand for a costly random drug testing program with a counterproposal to allow drug testing of a teacher based upon cause that would be far less costly. The board has responded by pressing ahead to hire replacement workers for the teachers at \$187-\$204 per teacher per day.

The school board is claiming to be fighting drug abuse while seeking to scapegoat teachers for a recent accident involving two students driving under the influence of drugs that resulted in a death. The district's web site lashed out, "The public has a right to expect persons employed by the Illini Bluffs School District to be free from the effects of drugs and alcohol... The Board of Education has a right to expect its employees to report for work fit and able for duty." The school board has failed to respond to a challenge by teachers to point to a single drug-related issue among faculty that would warrant such a program.

Illinois State Board of Education statistics reveal the Illini Bluffs teachers were paid an average \$42,418 last year, which falls well below the statewide average of \$63,296.

### **New talks in two-month Texas mill strike**

Teamsters Local 657 and negotiators for the C.H. Guenther & Son flourmill in San Antonio, Texas resumed mediated negotiations August 19 in an effort to resolve wage and benefit issues. Nearly 90 workers at the flourmill walked off the job April 25 after the company pressed to raise premiums for family benefit coverage from \$11 a month to \$35 a month starting January 1.

Teamsters Local 657 has pointed out that even when a wage increase of 50 cents an hour is factored in, workers will still lose an estimated \$4 a week from their paychecks.

### **Ontario colleges set to strike**

Over 8,000 support workers at 24 colleges across Ontario could begin strike action as early as September 1 when their current contract expires if ongoing talks do not yield an agreement.

Negotiators for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), which represents the workers, say they are seeking more full-time jobs in a new contract.

In a related development, support workers at the Université de Sherbrooke east of Montreal, Quebec who have been without a contract for more than two and a half years have pledged to continue their "pressure tactics" of rotating strikes into the new school year.

### **Workers strike Windsor Ford dealership**

Thirty-five workers at Rose City Ford dealership in Windsor, Ontario went on strike August 17 after one worker with 11 years experience was suspended and two others were threatened with firing due to a lack of proper certification.

The same day, a mass picket by strikers and supporting union members was held blocking access to the dealership, which remained open for business. Workers at the dealership have been without a contract since July of last year but recently overwhelmingly voted against union decertification.



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