

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 September 2011

Brazilian construction workers resume strike

After returning to work following an agreement between their unions and management, workers at the Maracana Stadium renovation project in Rio de Janeiro went on strike a second time September 1.

The workers had originally walked out August 17 when an explosion on the site resulted in an injury. In addition to improved safety conditions, they called for a raise, better meals and health coverage for themselves and their families. Another demand was the presence of a doctor on the site during the night shift.

On August 22, with assurances from their unions and management that their conditions would be met, they voted to return to the job. After promised changes did not materialize, the workers walked out anew.

The consortium that is contracted for the renovation has stated that it “will go immediately to the Labour Tribunal to get the strike declared illegal and order a return to work.”

Sao Paulo funeral workers strike over pay and working conditions

Over 1,000 municipal employees—mainly funeral workers—in Sao Paulo went on strike August 31, demanding improved working conditions and a pay raise. The workers want a 39 percent increase in their salaries. They have not received a raise since 1995.

The Justice Tribunal of Sao Paulo declared the strike illegal, demanded that the strikers return to work and imposed a fine for each day that they stay out. The strike has delayed the release of bodies for burial.

Members of the Sindsep municipal employees union voted in assembly September 1 to extend the strike at least until Monday, when new meetings with management are scheduled. Sindsep’s director Juneia Martins Batista told reporters, “We decided not to return until the government negotiates.”

Chilean protesters strike, demand renationalization of copper industry

Thousands of workers and supporters in the northern Chilean mining city of Calama held a general strike, march and other actions on August 29. According to local media, thousands marched to demand the “renationalization” of the nation’s copper mines. Press reports on the strike say that adherence was high.

Chile’s copper mining industry, including the Codelco Chuquicamata mining complex near Calama, is still officially nationalized. However, a number of reforms under the Piñera administration—affecting taxes, joint ventures, percentage of profits, deregulation and other policy changes—have led many Chileans to suspect that the eventual goal of the

reforms is complete privatization.

Workers and residents of Calama, located about 1,500 (930 miles) north of Santiago, have complained for years that they see few if any benefits from the nearby Chuquicamata mine, and they are demanding a share of the profit for improving the city and their standard of living. They held protests and marches last June over the same issues.

In addition to the marches, there were blockades of main arteries into and out of Calama, some with tires set ablaze. The governor called for the *carabineros*, who used water cannon and teargas to break up some of the blockades, to which protesters responded with rocks. About 20 protesters were arrested, among them Calama’s mayor.

That night, residents staged a *cacerolazo*, i.e., banging of casserole pots, and chanted, “Producimos cobre, y seguimos pobres!” (“We produce copper, and we remain paupers!”)

Peruvian mineworkers strike, march over stalled talks

Over 1,100 workers at the Shougang Hierro Peru iron mine near the southwestern city of Marcona struck on August 31 over the company’s intransigence in contract talks. The majority of workers, who are new hires, earn 43.55 nuevos soles (US\$16) per day, and want a raise of 8.5 nuevos soles (US\$3.11). The company is offering 1.3 (US\$0.48), an amount that strike committee president Mauel Acuña called “nothing.” A miner with seniority earns 68 nuevos soles (US\$25).

“The price of the mineral iron is rising all the time rising, the enterprise has more money, more net profits, but the workers, we stay in practically the same totally miserable situation; different from other mining centers who have a big salary advantage over us,” Acuña told *La República*. The workers are also demanding improvements in working conditions.

About 200 of the striking miners marched to Ica, the capital of the southern region of the same name, where they hope that the government will respond to their pleas.

Venezuelan auto workers end four-week strike

Workers returned to the job at Toyota’s auto assembly plant in Sucre, Venezuela on Monday, September 5. The plant’s union, Sintratoyota, called the workers back after over a month on strike. About 85 percent of the approximately 2,200 workers showed up for work.

The conflict dates back to 2009, when Sintratoyota accused Toyota of not fulfilling promises regarding pension payments. The union filed a lawsuit, but a judgment by a labor tribunal found in favor of Toyota. The union called for management to enter a dialogue over the disputed pension claims, a call the company rejected.

The strike was called on August 2. The company denounced the strike as “illegal” and appealed to the government to force the workers back to

the plant. Furthermore, the company fired eight members of the union's directorate, including secretary general Richard Guevara. Company sources accused them of imposing "a climate of anarchy, intimidation and violence" and "union terrorism" against the wishes of workers in the plant.

In fact, a group of workers claiming to represent 1,000 employees against the strike called on the Labor Ministry to send an official to the plant to settle the matter.

A Sintratoyota delegation met with the state governor, but to no avail. On Friday, September 2, the union agreed to lift the strike and issued the back-to-work call.

Mexico: Teachers in Acapulco strike in protest against extortion

More than 5,000 teachers in the Mexican resort city of Acapulco stopped work on August 29 over extortion by criminal gangs.

In a press conference, 47 union delegates declared their decision to stay away from classes because their security demands have not been met. One delegate remarked, "The teachers that have stopped work have increased in number, but not because we don't want to work; we are anxious to but we can't because the petition has not been fulfilled". The delegates asked that there be no photographs or mention of names.

The area has recently undergone a wave of violence, with an increasing number of acts of extortion, kidnappings and assassinations, as rival gangs vie for control of the drug trade. On August 24, several schools were closed after messages were placed demanding half the pay of the teachers beginning in October.

Molders strike eight Anchor Glass factories across US

Some 150 mold makers at eight Anchor Glass Container Corporation facilities across the United States walked out on strike September 1 after their old agreement expired. The United Steelworkers (USW) union, which represents the striking workers, has not made details available about the impasse in negotiations. However, union representative Jim Valenti indicated that workers are striking "to get health care for their families and children."

In a statement, the company intimated that it intends to take advantage of the current unemployment to break the strike, saying, "In an environment of high unemployment and great economic uncertainty, USW leadership has taken an action that, unfortunately, could negatively impact employees and their families." While willing to negotiate, "Anchor has and will continue to take all appropriate action to ensure uninterrupted service to its customers," the company said.

The strike affects plants in Zanesville, Ohio, Elmira Heights, New York; Greendale, Indiana, Henryetta, Oklahoma; and four other locations. Anchor Glass employs some 2,900 workers in North America and draws annual revenues of about \$800 million.

Federal mediators suspend talks at American Airlines

The National Mediation Board recessed talks between American Airlines and three union groups representing 17,000 flight attendants and

11,000 mechanics and ground workers due to a lack of movement. Airline management is seeking concessions to make up what they claim is an annual \$800 million cost in labor expenses above rival airlines.

American did not take advantage of bankruptcy back in 2006 to force through court-imposed cuts on its workforce. The company has not posted a profit since 2007, while its rivals returned to profitability in 2010.

The airline is now focusing on unmediated talks with the union representing 8,700 pilots in an effort to get concessions that can then provide a wedge against workers in other sectors of the company.

Strike at Ontario colleges

More than 8,000 support workers at 24 community colleges across Ontario were on strike as of September 1 after rejecting the latest contract offer, even as school administrators pledge to stay open during the strike.

Workers affected are members of the Ontario Public Services Employees Union (OPSEU) and include maintenance and food service workers as well as IT support and scheduling staff. In addition to wages, one of the main issues in the dispute is job security. The growth in the number of non-unionized part-time staff has far outstripped that of full-timers and colleges are seeking to weaken their already tenuous rights in the workplace.

Teachers unions have indicated they will continue working throughout the strike so as not to disrupt the opening of the new school year, saying only that they will not fill in for striking workers.

Strike at McGill University in Montreal

One thousand seven hundred non-academic support staff at McGill University in Montreal went on strike September 1 in their fight for protections to pensions and benefits in a new contract.

The strikers are members of the McGill University Non-Academic Certified Association (MUNACA) and work in student and laboratory support and various other services. In addition to lacking basic guarantees to pensions, their union says they do not have a regular wage scale and must work for up to 35 years to get full salary for their position. At last report, the University was offering less than what the old contracted provided.

Saskatchewan college set to strike

Some 1,300 teachers, along with 700 other service staff, are set to go on strike at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technologies (SIAST) after being without a contract for over two years. The strike will affect four campuses across the western province.

The workers are represented by the Saskatchewan Government and General Employee's Union (SGEU), which issued a strike notice last Friday after rejecting the employer's latest offer, which included a wage offer of 5.5 percent over three years.

Negotiations have stalled since last January when mediation failed, but SIAST is asking that a government mediator be brought in again to avoid disruption to the new school year, a suggestion the union has so far rejected.



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