

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 September 2011

Colombian oil workers return to work after strike

Workers for the Canadian oil firm Pacific Rubiales ended their strike September 22 with an agreement to discuss six points. Some 7,000 workers returned to work at the company's Rubiales and Quifa oilfields located in Colombia's Meta state.

Among the points of discussion are: normalization of salaries for all the workers, regular, contracted and subcontracted; guarantees of the full exercise of union rights; stability in the contracting process and reintegration of workers fired since July, when contract laborers demanded pay parity with regular employees. The USO oil workers union president, Rodolfo Vecino, has accused the company of targeting at least 800 workers sympathetic to the union.

The ongoing conflict between the workers and Pacific Rubiales has been characterized by outbreaks of violence. On the September 20, more than 300 riot police arrived at the town of Puerto Gaitan to break up roadblocks using teargas and bombs. The workers fought back, resulting in injuries on both sides.

Argentine bus drivers lift five-day strike

Bus drivers for Buenos Aires' suburban Line 60 bus route returned to work September 24 after five days on strike over nonpayment of wages. The drivers will await the findings of a Labor Ministry commission due in 60 days.

The drivers union UTA accused the Monsa bus line of miscalculating salaries, and on September 20 the Labor Ministry ordered Monsa to pay the drivers 600 pesos (US\$142) each while a commission investigated the company's pay for its 1,600 drivers. Although UTA officials worked out a "social peace" deal with Monsa—to

return to work while negotiators hashed out the issues—members rejected it in assembly and voted to remain on strike.

Drivers and supporters marched along the Panamerican Highway, and some blockaded streets. With the promise of the payments, they agreed to go back on the job.

According to a UTA delegate, the Labor Ministry guaranteed the payment of the salary difference by threatening to withdraw the government subsidy that Monsa receives. The conflict dates back to January, and in June there was a strike and blockades over the same issues.

Brazilian construction workers ordered back to work

Construction workers at Sao Paulo's Maracana Stadium went back to work September 20 after a judge declared their strike illegal. It was the second time the workers had walked off the job.

The Maracana Stadium is in the midst of a refurbishing and is scheduled to host the World Cup finals in 2014 as well as the 2016 Olympics.

In August, a worker was injured when a barrel containing solvent exploded. The workers walked off the job with a list of demands including increased safety, better pay and conditions, expansion of health care and an increase in their meal allowance. Promised by union negotiators and management that the demands would be met, they returned to work, only to be frustrated by company foot-dragging.

They struck again two weeks ago, but a judge ruled against them on September 16. According to the *Jamaica Observer*, "the workers agreed to return after being guaranteed a new meeting with constructors."

Mexican health workers strike

Over 10,000 health workers, including doctors, nurses and administrative personnel, all members of the SNTSS health workers union, suspended their labors on September 22 in health facilities throughout the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca.

Union leader Jenoe Ruiz Lopez named among the demands the regularization and recodification of honoraria for 400 employees, remodeling and substitution of two health center buildings and the relocation of personnel while the repairs take place.

If the problems are not fixed, “our plenary could decide to radicalize the struggle, which would imply an eruption of an indefinite strike,” Lopez told *Milenio*.

Bankruptcy court mediation attempts to restructure Philadelphia Orchestra pensions and reach new contract

The musicians union and the Philadelphia Orchestra Association management left a US Bankruptcy Court hearing September 21, agreeing to continue court-mediated negotiations over the restructuring of pensions and a new labor agreement.

Should a bankruptcy court struggle ensue, it is expected that the Philadelphia Orchestra Association will attempt to utilize Chapter 11 bankruptcy to shed its pension liabilities. A lawyer for the pension fund charges that the orchestra association improperly moved millions of dollars into its endowment fund—money that would have gone to the pension fund given it is the largest creditor in the bankruptcy case.

In the most recent court hearing, no musicians or staff were present, an indication that both the labor bureaucracy and management hope to settle without interference from the rank and file. It is believed that any attempt by the orchestra association to terminate its pension obligations could trigger a strike by orchestra union members.

Contract deal ends molders’ strike at Anchor Glass

The strike by 150 mold makers at nine Anchor Glass Container Corporation facilities across the United States ended September 20 when the United Steelworkers union and management agreed to a new contract. The new agreement calls for 50 cent wage increases in each year of the new two-year agreement.

Anchor management agreed to maintain the old health care benefits for current workers with continued increases in weekly contributions. However, new hires will be subjected to a different tier of health care under the terms of concessions that were not disclosed by the union. The nearly three-week strike closed plants in Zanesville, Ohio; Elmira Heights, New York; Greendale, Indiana; Henryetta, Oklahoma; and four other locations. Anchor Glass experienced bankruptcy in 2006. Today it employs 2,900 workers in North America and has annual revenues of about \$800 million.

Toronto area transit set to strike

Two hundred fifty Transit workers employed by Miller Transit on 51 routes north of Toronto, Ontario could go on strike this week after voting in favor of strike action last week.

Although their union, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), has not set a strike date, the workers have been in a legal strike position since last weekend. A strike was averted two weeks ago when the union agreed to go back to the bargaining table at the last minute and union negotiators have made clear that they hope that ongoing negotiations will obviate the necessity of a strike.

Miller is a private contractor that provides service for Go transit in the York Region, the commuter network serving the Toronto area. The workers affected, who include bus operators, mechanics and maintenance staff, have been without a contract since March.



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