

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 October 2011

Peruvian mineworkers strike again after talks fail

Following the breakdown of last-minute negotiations, workers at southern Peru's Cerro Verde copper mine stopped work on September 29. It was the third time in September that the workers had walked off the job. The strike involves about 1,200 workers.

The primary issue is the company's offer of a one-time bonus of 2,800 soles (US\$1,010) per worker, which would be contingent on a no-strike pledge until January. The workers want a 7 to 9 percent raise instead, a proposal that the company has refused to consider. The raise would represent about 350 soles (US\$126) per month.

Another point of contention is Cerro Verde's insistence on the collective bargaining contract being in effect for three years. The workers want the contract to be valid for one year.

The government of recently elected president Ollanta Humala has declared the strike legal, a ruling that Cerro Verde has appealed. According to Peruvian labor law, a company cannot hire replacements during a legal strike.

Chilean health workers hold three-day strike opposing privatization

Some 26,000 health workers, members of Chile's Confusam national municipal health workers' federation, took part in a three-day work stoppage that began on September 28. The strike concluded with a march and demonstration in front of the Health Ministry in downtown Santiago on September 30. Calling the action "successful," Confusam claimed a 95 percent adherence rate to the strike.

The action called attention to the demand that a protocol agreement signed with the government last year—by which the health ministry would increase public spending on health, equalize health workers' pay and benefits nationwide and provide transparency regarding policy—be respected. Confusam accused Health Minister Jaime Manalich of inadequate responses to their demands.

Moreover, Confusam president Carolina Espinoza accused Manalich of promoting a parallel agenda aimed at "privatizing the public health sector and converting it into another business opportunity."

Brazilian bank workers launch nationwide strike over pay demand

Workers at banks across Brazil walked out over salary demands on September 27. All but one of Brazil's 27 states were affected.

The strike was called by the National Financial Sector Workers Confederation (Contraf) after negotiations reached an impasse with the

National Bank Federation (Fenaban) over the percentage of an upcoming salary readjustment. Fenaban's offer of 8 percent was well below Contraf's demand of 12.8 percent.

There are about 480,000 bank employees in Brazil. Just one year ago, bank employees struck for 15 days, ending their stoppage on October 14, 2010 when the union withdrew its 11 percent demand to accept the banks' offer of 7.5 percent.

Professors hold 48-hour strike at Dominican Republic University

Classes were suspended at the Dominican Republic's Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) September 26 and 27 as professors struck over salaries and other issues. The professors are represented by the university's branch of the Federation of Professors' Associations, or Faprouasd. Members of the university's employees association also stopped work.

Among the professors' demands are a 15 percent salary hike and increases in per diem and travel allowances. In addition, Faprouasd is calling for infusions of several million pesos for the ARS-UASD health care and disability agency and "basic priorities of the academy." Minister of Higher Education Liga Amada Melo maintains that the ministry is legally constrained by a 5 percent allotment from the national budget.

The evening of September 27 the professors held an assembly in which they resolved to sharpen the struggle if their demands were not met by Monday. On September 28, they returned to their classrooms.

Puerto Rican bus drivers strike over wage and health benefit demands

Bus drivers for Puerto Rico's Metropolitan Bus Authority (AMA) struck September 29 after their union (TUAM) and government officials failed to agree on collective bargaining stipulations. The drivers want a wage increase as well as extension of health coverage to domestic partners.

As negotiations remained log-jammed, the drivers voted October 2 to extend the strike into this week. At the same time, TUAM representatives agreed to meet with Transportation and Labor ministry officials on October 4. TUAM president Antonio Díaz Lopez said at a press conference, "We will negotiate, but they must respect the dignity of workers."

Lopez broached the possibility of a national strike October 17 and 18 that would be joined by truckers, taxi drivers and other carriers.

Honduran teachers, health workers strike

Members of the College of Middle Education Professors of Honduras (Copemh) blockaded Tegucigalpa's Centroamerica Boulevard at the national educators' social security agency Inprema on September 29, demanding back salaries for more than 20,000 public school teachers.

The Education Secretariat announced that it would pay the back salaries in two weeks, as soon as they receive the funds from the Finance Department, but Copemh countered that "since April the minister (Alejandro Ventura) has been lying to the people."

According to Copemh president Jaime Rodriguez, there are teachers in every department in Honduras who haven't received salaries for over two years. He added that many have lost their houses and cars, and some even are being sued because of the government's delays.

On September 30, health workers in the Honduran Social Security Institute (IHSS) completed their third day of "progressive stoppage" to pressure the agency to approve benefit provisions in their collective contract. The workers' union, Sitraihss, has been engaged in dialogue with Labor and Health department officials, but talks have stalled.

IHSS officials have predictably denounced the stoppage as a danger to patients, and IHSS director Mario Zelaya petitioned the Labor Ministry to have it declared illegal. The declaration would facilitate suspensions and firings of strikers.

Sitraihss President Hector Escoto told *El Heraldo* that they would try to compensate for any damage done to patients. "We will talk to the doctors so that the patients that lost their consultations can be attended to."

Strike called off against Philadelphia arts center

The union representing 1,000 stagehands, ushers, wardrobe and box office workers at Philadelphia's Kimmel Center ended its strike without a contract, ordering workers back to work October 1 after 18 hours. Local 8 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) said the return to work represented a one-week "cooling-off" period given substantial contract differences, and the two sides would resume bargaining sometime on October 10 or later. Local 8 indicated that the union is seeking expanded wages, benefits and union jurisdiction.

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the union's decision to return to work was to allow performances of *Carmen* by the Opera Company of Philadelphia to go forward. The cooling-off period will allow all but one performance of *Carmen* to go forward. Cancellation of *Carmen* would have resulted in a nearly \$2 million loss to the opera company.

The Kimmel Center has already implemented some layoffs and program cutbacks. Currently the center is owed \$1.4 million by the Philadelphia Orchestra, which is teetering on bankruptcy.

Seaway workers set to strike

At least 475 workers employed by St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corp. could go on strike this week if their union, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), follows through on strike notice delivered late last week.

The workers include both supervisory and operations staff at the company that manages marine traffic through the seaway. The federal government has already warned that any work stoppage would be regarded as a threat to Canadian business, implying possible intervention

in the case of a strike.

Negotiations, which have been ongoing since May, continued through the weekend. CAW head Ken Lewenza said a strike was necessary to get negotiations moving "in the right direction."

Strike at Toronto Chinese language paper

One hundred forty workers at *Ming Pao Daily News*, one of the country's largest Chinese language newspapers, went on strike September 21 in their bid for a first union contract.

Workers at the paper, including journalists, earn between minimum wage and \$14 an hour and have been fighting for a contract since voting to join the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) over a year ago. In addition to wages, the main issues at stake include hours of work, vacation provisions and job security.

Picket lines at Vancouver film fest

Locked-out workers employed by Rocky Mountaineer Railtours formed picket lines at the opening gala for the Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) last week, with many invitees choosing to stay away from the event.

Last June 108 members of the Teamsters union working as attendants at the Rocky Mountaineer station were locked out after voting to go on strike. Although the use of replacement workers is not legal in British Columbia, these workers fall under federal jurisdiction allowing the employer to bring them in during this dispute.

Most film unions in B.C. honored the picket line and festival organizers have said that while they were aware of the dispute, they were not properly informed of the implications of holding the event at this venue.



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