

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 April 2012

Worker's death sparks strike at Panama Canal construction project

At least 4,500 workers at the Panama Canal expansion project walked off the job on April 13 after the death of one of their colleagues. Luis Guardia, 37, was "buried by sand in one of the tunnels into which he fell because he lacked the necessary equipment to get out of the area," a union official told Univisión.

The Panama Canal expansion project, run by the GUPC (United for the Canal Group) consortium, has been struck before in its two years of operation over salaries, safety and working conditions. In January, a strike lasted six days, ending when the government issued a decree ceding to workers' pay demands.

Last March, a group of workers announced an indefinite strike over the demand for a new collective agreement that would include a raise in overtime pay. It was called off when the workers' union, Suntrac, signed an accord with contractors.

Suntrac limited this most recent strike to 24 hours and agreed to meet with GUPC on April 16 to "begin to review the specifications of 43 demands, which include improvements in labor conditions, industrial safety and salary scale."

Two-day strike by Panamanian nursing technicians

Nursing technicians for Panama's public health facilities began a 48-hour strike on April 11 to demand adjustments in their salary scales. The strikes were called after appeals to the Health Ministry (Minsa) and Social Security Fund (CSS) were rebuffed.

Some technicians, members of the Association of Practical Nursing (Anpate), have been picketing outside the CSS's Dr. Arnulfo Arias Madrid Hospital since April 9.

On the April 14, a group of protesters in the capital attempted to block the highway after hearing that the CSS had postponed a scheduled meeting. Police using tear gas dispersed them.

Anpate and Minsa-CSS had been in negotiations for several months, and union reps claim that an agreement had already been reached regarding reclassifications and pay scales, but that the government has reneged on its promises.

In response to their demands, Minister of Health Franklin Vergara said the technicians would have to wait until 2014, claiming that there is no money in the budget to pay for a salary increase before then. Anpate spokespeople have said that the strike will be prolonged if Minsa refuses to fulfill its end of the accord.

Argentinean bus drivers strike over firings

Drivers for the Buenos Aires metropolitan bus route Line 60 struck on April 12 over the firing of four coworkers. The strike, which included a blockage of traffic along the downtown Avenida Callao, was called after a binding arbitration meeting with management failed to result in the reinstatement of the fired drivers.

Striking drivers had blocked downtown traffic two days before and prevented the operation of a tollbooth on the Pan-American expressway. The actions took place despite a decree of a 15-day "obligatory conciliation" during which negotiations with the Line 60 operator MONSA management would tackle the issue of the fired workers as well as demands for improvements in working conditions.

On April 14, an assembly called by the UTA transportation workers union voted to continue the strike until the four workers were rehired. However, later that day, UTA accepted the conciliation and called off the strike. The parties agreed to meet on April 17.

Argentinean teachers strike, protest closures of classes

Teachers in Buenos Aires struck for one day and protested in front of the city's legislative building April 10 over the closing of 96 public school classes. The closures stem from the passage of Resolution 15, which calls for the closure and "fusion" of classes with attendance of less than 15 pupils.

The protesters, members of the Ademys teachers union, marched to the Legislature, where they accused the Education Ministry of "disinvestment" in public education.

On April 12, members of the Ute-Ctera educational union federation, accompanied by students and some local politicians, presented a petition with 50,000 signatures to the Legislature demanding "that they close not one class nor one grade in the City."

Striking Salvadoran food production workers face threats and violence

Workers at a baked goods production plant in the city of San Salvador, El Salvador have been on strike since February 19. During that time the workers, mostly women, have faced threats, intimidation and violence from scabs and company thugs.

On February 20, the workers' union, SELSA, published an open letter to the nation's President, Mauricio Funes Cartagena, and Minister of Labor and Social Security, Humberto Centeno. The letter explained that over the last two years the company, LIDO SA, has employed a strategy of hiring contract labor to perform the same work as directly employed workers, but at lower wages and without benefits.

All of SELSA's efforts at negotiation and arbitration were refused or ignored by LIDO management. Therefore, the workers went on strike and

maintained a vigil at the plant. On March 20, a group of about 40 men from another LIDO-affiliated facility entered the plant and attacked the workers, particularly targeting women, dislodging them and causing a number of injuries. Nonetheless, the striking workers maintained a vigil at the plant.

LIDO has continued to stonewall, at the same time threatening the workers and engaging in actions aimed at provoking a violent response, thus providing an opportunity to have the strike declared illegal.

In the latest incident, LIDO took advantage of Holy Week festivities, during which the number of striking workers at the plant was lower than usual, to attempt to prevent food and water from reaching them, and preventing the use of restrooms. Despite these efforts, supporters were able to get food and water to the strikers.

On April 10 SELSA sent the Labor Minister an urgent request for a “special inspection” of the plant, but according to SELSA director Atilio Jaimes Pérez, “For the moment the Labor Minister has maintained a submissive attitude and has not pronounced about the conflict, nor about the strike. It all makes one think that they are awaiting the ruling from the Labor Court regarding the strike qualification.”

Weeklong Vermont teachers’ strike ends

Teachers in the Vermont towns of Poultney, Wells, Middletown Springs and Tinmouth ended a six-day strike April 12 by ratifying a new multi-year contract. According to the teachers’ union, both sides had come to an agreement on wages and health care, but an attempt by the board to impose new work rules antagonized teachers.

Neither side would divulge exact details until the school board ratified the agreement, but the new rules were aimed at dictating how teachers spent their workdays. According to NECN.com, picketing teachers were chanting “We don’t even have time to pee,” outside school board offices.

Oregon picket hit by security guard vehicle in steel strike

A striking member of the United Steel Workers (USW) was hit April 12 by vehicle driven by a security guard outside the Cascade Steel plant in McMinnville, Oregon. The decision by the McMinnville police department to merely cite the security guard for failing to yield to a pedestrian drew anger from the 300 members of Local 8378 who have been on an unfair labor practices strike against the company since April 8.

The victim, 35-year-old Lee Frakes, was released from the hospital the following day, but remains at home and still cannot walk.

USW president Leo Gerard felt compelled to issue a press release over the incident, saying, “We are shocked and outraged that the driver was merely given a traffic citation, even though the evidence is clear that he struck the USW picketer with his vehicle on purpose. We want to know why he was not arrested and taken into custody. A person who deliberately tries to run over another human being deserves much more than a traffic citation. Assault or even attempted murder would be more appropriate.”

Gerard, however, took no other action except to say he would add an additional charge to the union’s unfair labor practices case against the company.

Strike at Wisconsin industrial plant

Machinists at Ashland Industries in Ashland, Wisconsin went on strike April 1. International Association of Machinists (IAM) business agent Marty St. Peters declined to provide the news media with details about the work stoppage. Company officials are also remaining silent.

The 43 members of the IAM walked off the job after three weeks of negotiations collapsed without a new agreement. Ashland Industries manufactures heavy-duty equipment such as earthmovers and farm implements.

Air Canada pilots relaunch sick-out

Even as their union denounced them, dozens of pilots for embattled Air Canada called in sick last week in the latest step of a coordinated rank-and-file protest against government and management actions at the country’s largest airline.

The head of the Air Canada Pilots Association (ACPA) made an appeal to all pilots to report for work and ignore the action of some pilots calling in sick to protest the treatment of two leading spokesmen for statements made to the press.

Last month, federal Labour Minister Lisa Raitt maneuvered to block 8,600 ground crew from going on strike. As a precautionary measure, Parliament passed back-to-work legislation in mid-March, but members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers staged a wildcat strike that disrupted Air Canada’s flight schedule in late March.

Labrador City supermarket workers strike

After voting overwhelmingly in favor of strike action last week and then rejecting a last minute offer from management, about 25 workers at two supermarkets in Labrador City, Newfoundland walked off the job Friday morning.

The final offer from negotiators for the Carol Wabush Co-op added a signing bonus but a spokesperson for the United Steelworkers union, representing the strikers, said that with the recent jump in the cost of living due to increased mining operations in the region, the wage increases they were being offered were entirely inadequate.

The workers have been without a contract since February of 2011 and their strike leaves only one supermarket open to serve all of Labrador West.



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