

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 May 2012

36-hour strike by Argentinean subway workers

Workers in Buenos Aires's Subte subway system stopped work for 36 hours beginning May 16. The action, first called by the AGTSyP (Subway and Tram Workers Union Association), was joined by the UTA transport workers union, which claimed "total compliance" by its membership with the action.

Subte serves some one million residents of Buenos Aires and its surroundings. It was taken over by Metrovías S.A. in 1994 during the Carlos Menem administration's wave of privatizations.

AGTSyP and UTA's primary demands include a salary raise of 28 percent, better maintenance of the system and measures to enhance security. They also call for the renationalization of public transportation and improvements in working conditions.

Metrovías maintains that a 20 percent decrease in ridership following a recent fare hike makes the raise prohibitive. "It also asserts that it cannot assume new costs without a definition regarding the continuity of funding being produced," according to a report in *Continental*.

Subte has become a political football in the ongoing squabble between the Peronist national government of Cristina Fernández and the Buenos Aires administration of right-wing PRO party mayor Mauricio Macri. As a *Siglo 21* report put it, "Fernández transferred control of the service of the metro...from the state to the city, but Macri refuses to take charge unless the central government maintains the millions in subsidies that it was giving this means of transportation."

UTA and AGTSyP agreed to meet with Metrovías and the Labor Ministry on May 21. The unions have not discounted the calling of another strike this week if the stalemate drags on.

Bolivian doctors end strike over workday decree

The strike by doctors in Bolivia's public health system ended May 19, 53 days after it began. The doctors, accompanied by other medical and health personnel, went out on March 28 demanding the repeal of Supreme Decree 1126, which extends the physicians' working day from six to eight hours.

Bolivian President Evo Morales, beset by a number of protests and strikes in recent months, announced the suspension of the decree on May 5. Since then nurses, orderlies and other public hospital workers who had previously joined the doctors' strike signed agreements to return to work pending review of the decree in July.

At first, the doctors held to their demand for outright repeal and vowed that they would not return to work until 1126 was scrapped. In the end, however, they signed an agreement and announced that they would return to work on Monday, May 21. Though suspended, Decree 1126 is still on the books.

Panamanian public health workers walk out over contract noncompliance

Doctors, interns, residents, administrative and other workers in Panama's Social Security Fund (CSS) went on strike May 14 to demand the agency comply with previously signed agreements. Union spokespeople claimed an 85 percent rate of support from the more than 20,000 employees in the system.

Among the unions and associations involved in the action are those representing medical personnel, administrative workers, professional and technical workers and manual workers. The main demand is that the CSS and the Health Ministry comply with agreements already signed concerning equipment and supplies, human resources, training, union rights, salary scales and other issues.

CSS subdirector Marlon de Souza belittled the strike—claiming that participation was only 3 percent—and threatened reprisals and sanctions for "acts of vandalism" supposedly committed during a confrontation with riot police. By May 17, however, both sides had agreed to hold discussions.

The first round of dialogue held May 18 broke down and the strike was still in effect as of May 19.

Three-day strike by Mexican hospital workers

Doctors and nurses at the Hospital Civil in Oaxaca, Oaxaca, Mexico stopped work on May 16 demanding improvements at the facility. The medical workers belong to the SNTSS (National Syndicate of Health Secretariat Workers) and their demands included provision of medicine, surgical supplies and improvements in their work areas.

Some departments were completely paralyzed, while emergency, hospitalization and consultation services operated at partial capacity. The workers went back on the job at 2:00, May 18 following the announcement of an agreement.

In the accord, the state and federal governments are to provide 55 million pesos (US\$3,982,000) to amplify the neonatal and intensive care areas and rehabilitate the emergency room. "Also, the hospitalization spaces for obstetric surgery and births will be improved; in addition, a modern clinical laboratory and a full capacity blood bank for the hospital will be provided," according to a *Milenio* report.

Jamaican truck drivers continue strike over haulage rates, working conditions

A strike begun May 7 by truck drivers at a road project in Jamaica was still in effect as of May 18 following fruitless attempts at renegotiating

hauling rates and addressing working conditions and other issues.

The Palisadoes Road Project involves the construction of an elaborate four-lane strip leading to the Norman Manley International Airport in Kingston. The major contractor is the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC). Most of the hauling work is dealt out to subcontractors.

The All Island Truckers Association, which represents the truckers, called the strike to demand a better rate for hauling material to and from sites and tipping areas. The current rate is 300 Jamaican dollars (US\$3.46) a ton, an amount that Association president Leonard Green called “unacceptable.” The subcontractors claim that they cannot pay any more than that.

Other issues include improved security—truckers have complained of being attacked by groups of thugs—improvements to access roads and compensation for damages to trucks and trailers due to improper loading and off-loading equipment.

The truckers association held separate meetings with the subcontractors and CHEC on May 11 with no result. On May 17, the truckers submitted a proposal to a labor ministry official and have attended several meetings. Meanwhile, the truckers are remaining out while the impasse continues.

Talks resume in Utah strike by Dex workers

Contract talks between the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1269 and Dex One Corporation were to resume over the weekend after workers went on strike May 8. Advertising sales representatives at Dex One in Utah walked out last week at the company that publishes the Yellow Pages directory and operates the Dex Knows website. The IBEW launched the strike and filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board contending Dex had bargained in bad faith, tried to coerce workers to quit the union and interfered with workers’ protected rights.

The main issue separating the two sides according to the IBEW is that Dex is seeking contract language that will give management the right to outsource at will all of the 350 jobs represented by the IBEW at operations in Utah and six other western states. Dex has couched outsourcing in terms of changes in the market and technology. Dex Spokesman Chris Hardman stated, “Ours is a business in transformation. We’re a company that is going from a print-only environment to a digital multimedia environment, and what we are seeking is greater operating flexibility.”

Lockheed Martin strikers picket company headquarters in Maryland

A contingent of striking Lockheed Martin machinists joined by supporters picketed outside the company’s headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland to call attention to their struggle against the slashing of pensions and healthcare benefits. Some 3,600 members of the International Association of Machinists at the Lockheed plant in Forth Worth, along with 200 workers at Maryland’s Patuxent River Naval Air Station and 150 workers at California’s Edwards Air Force Base, are involved in the strike which began April 23.

While Lockheed Martin offered minimal wage increases and a signing bonus, its demand for concessions on health care and the stripping of traditional pensions from new hires caused workers to vote by a 93 percent margin to strike the defense contractor.

Meanwhile, two other smaller unions representing plant electricians and office workers accepted the concessions. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers ratified their agreement May 18 and the Office and Professional Employees International approved their agreement a day later.

CP rail workers set to strike

Some 4,800 workers at Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd. are set to go on strike as early as Wednesday of this week after delivering a strike notice last Friday and voting 95 percent in favor of strike action last month.

The workers affected include conductors, engineers, yardmen and rail traffic controllers who are members of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC). Central issues in the dispute involve work rules, wages and pensions which CP is seeking to cut by up to 40 percent.

The union has offered assurances that their action would not disrupt commuter service. Management has said that a number of both freight and commuter rail services across the country would be halted in the event of a strike. Negotiations have been ongoing since last October and workers have been without a contract since January.

Edmonton home-care workers poised to strike

Over 100 nurses and health care aides at Hardisty Care Centre in Edmonton, Alberta are set to go on strike this week in their fight to bring wages in line with industry standards. Hardisty is a nursing home for seniors whose management locked out workers in March, precipitating a strong vote in favor of strike action.

Their union, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), points to the refusal of Park Place Seniors Living, which runs the Centre, to accept the recommendations of an independent third party on at least two occasions. They also note that although the company has had a funding increase from the provincial government, they have refused to increase workers’ salaries, which are 20 percent below what is provided by the Alberta government.

New Brunswick nuclear engineers prepare to strike

Specialized nuclear engineers at the Point Lepreau Nuclear Generating Station in New Brunswick are preparing for strike action although the required 72-hour strike notice to their employer, Candu Energy Inc., has not yet been given.

This follows a similar move earlier this month by Ontario engineers at Candu Energy Inc. which is owned by engineering giant SNC-Lavalin Group, but that strike remains on hold. In New Brunswick, members of the Society of Professional Engineers & Associates voted 94 percent in favor of strike action in early May.

Labor strife at the plant comes as the reactor is gearing up for restart in the fall, a plan which the union says may have to be put on hold for safety reasons in the event of a strike or lockout.



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