

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 May 2012

Sao Paulo subway workers, bus drivers hold strikes

Subway workers in Brazil's most populous city, Sao Paulo, held a partial strike on May 23. About 8,000 of the subway workers union's 9,000 members participated.

The workers struck to demand a 20 percent wage hike. However, a labor court had ruled the day before that workers had to be on the job during rush hours and that 85 percent of them had to work during the other hours. The ruling was accompanied by a threat to levy a fine of \$50,000 per day for noncompliance.

The strike snarled traffic throughout the city, with streets congested and buses packed with morning commuters. At one point police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at commuters who blocked a station while protesting the strike.

The action only lasted five hours, however. By the afternoon, the union had accepted a raise, which various reports put at somewhere between 6 and 7 percent.

On May 24, metropolitan Sao Paulo's bus drivers stopped work, joining ongoing strikes by rail workers and teachers in a number of other Brazilian cities.

National strike and march by Panamanian teachers

Teachers throughout Panama went on strike on May 24 in an attempt to pressure the government to resume talks over a salary increase and other issues. Marchers went from the center of Panama City to the president's office.

A group of teachers was refused an audience with President Ricardo Martinelli. Instead they handed over a list of demands to the vice-minister of education. They called for a dialogue with the Education Ministry, but were rebuffed by the vice-minister.

The teachers unions denounced the minuscule raise of \$40 a year approved by the government for 2011 through 2013 and demanded a 62 percent raise to meet the rising cost of living, in addition to improved working conditions.

Teachers union leaders called the strike, which had the support of other unions, successful, claiming more than 60 percent participation, though the government downplayed its impact. A communiqué from Frenadeso (National Front for the Defense of Economic and Social Rights) called the action a "massive repudiation of the policies of the corrupt administration of Ricardo Martinelli, despite the heat wave that is afflicting Panama."

The unions have given the Ministry of Education a deadline of June 4 to respond, after which they say they will call an indefinite strike.

Mexican teachers strike; demonstrate against evaluation

Thousands of teachers marched in the Mexican cities of Morelia, Michoacán and Oaxaca, Oaxaca on May 24 to protest the imposition of a universal evaluation system for teachers. The teachers blocked entrances to government buildings as well as some major streets.

The teachers went on strike on May 21. Sections of the SNTE (National Syndicate of Education Workers) and the CNTE (National Education Workers Coordinator), a breakaway faction from the SNTE, participated in the actions.

El Universal reported on the Oaxaca mobilization, "Among their demands were the rejection of the Alliance for the Quality of Education (ACE), propelled by the federal government and the national SNTE directorship, as well as the punishment of 'those responsible for the aggressions against the people of Oaxaca in 2006,' when some 26 people were assassinated during a social movement to demand the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz."

ACE is a set of pro-business education "reforms"—including a standardized evaluation that teachers say ignores factors like

poverty, malnutrition and undersupplied schools—that have been promoted by right-wing president Felipe Calderón as well as by the SNTE directorship headed by Elba Esther Gordillo.

CNTE and SNTE have other actions planned if their demands do not get a positive response, including a march by some contingents on Mexico City and occupations of government and commercial buildings. Meanwhile, in the state of Guerrero, the Education Secretariat and the CETEG teachers union signed a rough draft agreement on some points on May 25, but the strike and encampment at the Government Palace begun earlier in the week against the evaluation continues.

San Francisco-area ferry workers call one-day strike

Golden Gate Bridge District ferry workers launched a surprise one-day strike May 26 shutting down boat transport one day before festivities marking the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge. A 35-member unit of the Inland Boatmen's Union called the strike after working 11 months without a contract, citing workloads, health care and other “side-table issues.”

The strike severed ferry service between Larkspur, Sausalito and San Francisco. The strike did not affect ferries operated by either the Blue & Gold or Red and White Fleet. Governor Jerry Brown responded by appointing a three-person panel to review the contract dispute charging it was a disruption to public service. The Inland Boatmen's Union is a division of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

Ohio gas refinery workers strike

Workers at Husky Energy's Lima, Ohio gasoline refinery went on strike May 25 after management and the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 624 failed to reach an agreement on a new three-year contract. Neither side has revealed the core issues of the dispute. The strike involves 235 workers at the facility, which normally refines 150,000 barrels a day.

The USW is categorizing the strike as an unfair labor practices strike after filing 23 charges with the National Labor Relations Board. USW spokesperson Lynne Hancock declared, “The strike is over local issues. It's definitely not about wages.”

At the end of January the USW reached agreement on a pattern

agreement with a group of individual refineries. It is rumored that the union has been pressured to push for stronger safety measures in the industry based on a total of 18 reported deaths since 2009.

Windsor construction sites idled by strike

Heavy equipment and crane operators in the Windsor area of southern Ontario went on strike Saturday after talks broke down last Thursday, bringing most area road construction to a halt.

The strikers are members of the International Union of Operating Engineers working for different employers who are organized in their own association. The strike will affect a number of municipal road and sewer projects as well as smaller job sites across the city.

According to the union, the one outstanding issue is the employers' demand to increase the workweek from 50 to 55 hours before paying overtime, well beyond what is required by law.

Strike looms at Stratford Festival

Fifty-three call centre ticket sellers with the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, west of Toronto, are in a legal strike position and could be off the job this week if ongoing talks don't produce a new deal.

The workers are member of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), who are fighting against the contracting out of their jobs. The two sides are far apart on wage issues as well with the union demanding 12 percent in a new two-year deal, and the Festival offering only 5 percent.

Festival management is preparing for strike action, asking patrons to buy their tickets on-line. If the strike goes ahead, it will be the first in the Festival's 59 years of operation.



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