

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 July 2012

Recycling workers in Argentina take strike action

Since July 16 Argentine cartoneros, who collect paper and cardboard in the streets of Buenos Aires, blocked access to a major landfill that takes in refuse from this sprawling metropolis of 14 million. The protesters demand medical benefits, better working conditions and government recognition of their recycling project.

The workers lifted the blockade on Wednesday, July 18. By this time, some 16,000 metric tons of refuse had accumulated in the city and its suburbs. “We took down our barricade because we understand that the population cannot be buried in refuse, but we need to be in the public agenda,” said a spokeswoman for the strikers. She added, “We demand to be recognized by the government for our role as part of the recycling industry.”

25,000 Argentine bus operators strike

On Wednesday July 19, 25,000 operators of Argentine interurban transport walked off their jobs. The operators are demanding a 23 percent raise. The bus operators belong to the Union of Motor coaches (UTA). Last January, the union had negotiated a 700 peso monthly stipend, in anticipation of a future wage increase. The money stopped in March.

The strike appears to have been settled, through government pressure on the coach operators, who agreed to reinstitute the original deal.

GM workers strike Brazilian plant

Thousands of General Motors workers in a plant at San José dos Campos, near the city of Sao Paulo, walked off their jobs on July 16. The 24-hour protest was to prevent the elimination of some assembly lines at the plant, effectively ending passenger car (but not light truck) production, threatening 1500 workers with layoffs.

The global recession and recession in its Argentine trade partners have taken a toll in Brazilian auto sales. Sales so far this year are down 1.2 percent from 2011 levels, and production is 9.4 percent lower than at the same time last year.

The San José dos Campos plant is one of three vehicle assembly lines GM has in Brazil. A management press release said that

production continued due to the fact that only half the workers went on strike.

The company will meet with the union again this week or next and will study consumer demand for the San José dos Campos-produced models through the end of the month before deciding whether to end passenger car production there. The metal workers union claims that GM may be violating an agreement with the government not to reduce its workforce in return for tax cuts. However, union leaders appear to be willing to accept at least some sackings.

20,000 public employees march in Brasilia

Twenty thousand public employees marched in Brasilia, Brazil’s capital city, on July 18. The march took place in support of a month-long strike of public and university employees. Federal public employees in the department of Health, Justice, Labor and Education are demanding a 22 percent wage increase, an end to wage differentials and subcontracting. Over 300,000 workers have joined the strike.

The strikers rejected an initial offer from the Dilma Rousseff administration.

Guyana police attack demonstration against utility prices

The Guyana police shot three protesters who were demonstrating against higher electricity rates. The police fired live ammunition and tear gas at 300 protesters who were blocking a bridge that connects the town of Linden with Brazil. Police accused the demonstrators of burning several buildings, including the offices of the ruling People’s Progressive Party.

The government is ending a subsidy to the Linden Electricity Company Incorporated. Pensioners from the Bauxite industry will now receive 50 free KWh of electricity, down from 300 KWh. Once their allotment is used up, they will have to buy anything over that amount at market rates. This is more than they can afford.

Health care workers strike in Montevideo, Uruguay

Health care workers at 13 neighborhood clinics in Montevideo went on a twenty-four-hour strike on July 19 over wages, working conditions and staffing. The clinics, located in the industrial suburbs of this capital city are part of the Uruguayan government's preventive care and primary care effort. The recent death of a two-year-old girl at one of the clinics revealed the lack of available resources for these clinics. The child had been brought to the emergency entrance at the Piedras Blancas clinic, but there were no doctors to attend to her.

In addition to the strike, medical employees will occupy two of the clinics—Cerro and Piedras Blancas—next week.

A spokesman for the strikers, Martín Pereira, denounced health authorities for treating the public health budget as a “cost” instead of seeing it as an investment in a healthy, more productive population. Pereira also said that there is a shortage of 2,700 medical workers at the 13 clinics.

One day strike hits San Francisco city courthouses

About 200 clerks launched a surprise one-day strike July 16 protesting concessions and demanding a resumption of talks that terminated last February. The action shut down half the city's courts and delayed other functions.

Workers rejected a February contract that imposed a 5 percent wage cut starting July 1 and voted by 95 percent last May to authorize a strike. The action was motivated by San Francisco Superior Court management when it refused to resume bargaining and declined to open their books to Service Employees International Union Local 1021 to justify the cuts.

Workers were angered after a panel of California judges issued a report that charged the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) with financial mismanagement. The AOC is accused of wasting \$660 million on a boondoggle computer system, hiring many officials at six-digit figure salaries and doling out money for overpriced construction projects. Court workers have been targeted to bear the burden of this crisis through five consecutive years without a cost of living pay increase and multiple furloughs.

Striking nursing home workers denounce company allegations of sabotage and vandalism

Striking nursing home workers at Connecticut HealthBridge care facilities are denouncing statements by company lawyers alleging vandalism and sabotage shortly before a strike on July 3. Lawyers have submitted a letter to the chief states attorney claiming union members removed wrist bands from over 30 residents, changed names on patient doors and wheelchairs and endangering patients by theft and destruction of company property.

Workers were outraged at the accusations. According to the *Hartford Courant*, “Several union members in Newington were so

disbelieving of the accusations that they speculated that the managers staged the sabotage to make the union look bad.”

“That's ridiculous! They're our family,” said Yolanda Amos, a nursing aide. “We would never sabotage our residents,” declared Elaine Ewart.

The Newington police department reported that there were no cameras in the Newington HealthBridge facility to corroborate company allegations. One of their officers who escorted the employees out of the Newington HealthBridge facility before the strike reported he only saw employees carrying purses.

About 700 members of the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, walked out on strike at five HealthBridge facilities over the imposition of massive increases in health care premiums and the termination of pensions. The National Labor Relations Board issued a complaint July 6 charging the company did not negotiate in good faith before declaring an impasse and imposing the cuts.

Lockout/strike for B.C. smelter workers

The Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) says that 1,150 workers at Rio Tinto Alcan's smelter in Kitimat, British Columbia have been forced to go on strike after the company served a lockout notice last week.

The workers had voted 96 percent in favor of strike action but the union waited until their hand was forced before taking action. The main issues in contract negotiations, which are ongoing, revolve around job security, particularly for new hires.

Northern Territories civic workers on strike

Sixty municipal workers employed by the town of Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories went on strike last week after rejecting the latest contract offer.

The workers are represented by the Union of Northern Workers (UNW) whose leaders have accused the city of bargaining in bad faith after they changed their economic offer. The city has attempted to lower its wage offer after withdrawing some demands on contracting out of jobs, which is a central issue in the dispute.

A number of services have been halted in the town, but negotiations are ongoing over essential services including garbage collection.



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