

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 July 2012

Brazil Federal Public Workers strike in its 6th week

The government of President Dilma Rouseff (Workers' Party) has indicated that it will begin contracting out the work of striking public employees and discounting days from their wages—something that it had not previously done. Workers' Party leader Idele Salvatti, defended the government's decision: "the government's priority is only one thing," said Salvatti, "deal with the international crisis."

The government's decision elicited mild protests from the CUT, the Brazilian federation of trade unions, which complained about a "lack of dialogue" with the President. The CUT also warned of the danger to national security of placing temporary contract employees in "strategic" locations.

Brazil Public University strike in its third month

The work stoppage by technical education workers, university professors and students at 57 federal universities and 34 out of the 38 federal technical institutes is now on its third month. On July 13 the strikers rejected an offer of a 45.1 percent raise. Among the issues blocking an agreement is the Rouseff administration's refusal to increase entry-level salaries, which are among the lowest in the country—US\$2000 for a new professor, compared to US\$2500 for a new policeman.

The strike that began on May 17, takes place in the context of 25 years of budget reforms—austerity policies that have substantially reduced education's share in the government budget.

One-day lockout at 8 Brazilian GM plants

On July 24, GM Brazil locked out 7,500 production workers at eight plants in its massive industrial park in Sao José dos Campos, sixty miles from the city of Sao Paulo.

The lockout was intended to pressure the metal workers union that represents GM workers into signing a new contract on GM's terms, including the sacking of 2,000 workers and the closure of one plant. The company used as a pretext the claim that the plants could be damaged by worker mobilizations.

Initially, the lockout was to continue for an indefinite number of days, but GM re-opened the plants once local authorities agreed to mediate the contract issues.

Customs workers strike in Brazil

A strike and slowdown by employees of Brazil's Customs has stopped the unloading of thousands of shipping containers arriving at the major ports of Vitoria, Santos, Río de Janeiro and Paranaguá. Ten thousand imported cars are being held up in Santos and Río Grande do Sul. Port authorities in Río de Janeiro have reported a 50 percent drop in revenues.

The job actions are over wages—customs employees are demanding a 25 percent raise. This strike takes place in the context of a strike by 350,000 public employees across the country.

Public Health Workers strike in Uruguay

The Federation of Public Health Employees (FFSP) resolved, following a general membership assembly on July 25, to go on strike. The walkout will affect health centers across the country.

FFSP leader Pablo Carrera demanded that the government create a National Health System, state-run public system. “No more lies,” declared Cabrera.

Colombian Rail strike affects coal exports

Four hundred rail workers employed by the Rail Company of the North (FENOCO) have been on strike since July 23. The workers are members of the Mine, Petrochemical and Energy Union (Sintramienergética). The strike will prevent the export of 160,000 metric tons of coal from the world’s largest coal mine operated by Drummond International.

The strikers are demanding job security, union rights, improved working conditions and that funds be allocated in their communities for social purposes.

Workers denounced Drummond for changing work schedules at the mine and ports where it operates in violation of labor rules. In addition, Drummond is said to be promoting death squads against union militants.

On July 19, miners at the La Jagua mine, owned by another transnational, Glencore Inc., also walked-off their jobs demanding higher wages. Miners at two other Glencore mines—El Tesoro, joined them and Consorcio Unido—joined their La Jagua comrades. All three mines export 7 millions metric tons annually. Management accused the strikers of lacking flexibility in light of current market conditions.

Minnesota auto mechanics in seventh week of strike over work rules and benefits

Some 60 auto mechanics at several auto dealers in and around Duluth, Minnesota, are entering their seventh week on strike over medical benefits and work rules. Members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 241 struck dealers represented by the Duluth

Automobile Dealers Association on July 15 and mediated sessions have failed to bring about a settlement.

UAW members object to new work rules that will speed up the time schedules allowed for maintenance operations. Workers also object to language that will compel them to pay 100 percent of increases in health care premiums during the first two years of a four-year contract. During years three and four, management proposes to split the cost of premiums 50-50.

Wages are less of an issue, according to the UAW, with management proposing a first year wage increase of 2.8 percent followed by 2.3 percent wage increases for the remaining three years of the contract.

Strike/lockout at Montreal hotel

Around 600 workers at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Montreal are on strike after being locked out by management for the alleged use of pressure tactics to force a settlement of their contract dispute.

The workers are represented by the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN). Union officials say that workers were locked out for wearing orange union scarves, forcing them to take strike action. Workers had earlier voted overwhelmingly in favor of a strike after being without a contract for over a month.

Main issues in the dispute center on wages and shift rules, which, workers say, do not allow them sufficient income to live. Management personnel are reportedly doing the work of the strikers, but the strike is already having a severe impact on service at one of Montreal’s busiest hotels.



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