

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 August 2012

Argentinean subway workers strike over salary stalemate

Subway workers in the Argentinean capital city of Buenos Aires launched a 2-day strike beginning on the night of August 3. Officials of the AGTSyP subway workers union announced the measure, claiming that two months ago a meeting regarding salaries and subway improvements had been scheduled for August 3 at the Labor Ministry, but it did not materialize. Both the Labor Ministry and Metrovías, the subway system's concession holder, deny that any meeting was planned.

ATSyP secretary-general Roberto Pianelli told reporters that “we should have had a salary increase on May 1, we did not get it and we do not know when we will be paid.” Pianelli also blasted rightwing mayor Mauricio Macri, who claims that the city government “does not have any responsibility at all” concerning the Buenos Aires subway system.

The UTA transport workers union, which represents some of the subway workers, originally called a three-day strike to begin on Monday, August 6, but called it off later without explanation.

Colombian rail strike, talks continue

As of August 3, the strike begun July 23 by 400 workers at the Colombian FENOCO rail company—which carries coal from the huge Drummond coal mine to port facilities—was in force. The workers' demands involve pay, job security, working conditions and other issues.

The Sintramienergética [Mine, Petrochemical and Energy Union] also demands the reinstatement of 17 workers fired during a strike in 2009.

Faced with dwindling stocks at its port facilities, Drummond declared force majeure—according to Reuters,

“a clause provided in contracts where buyers or sellers are allowed to renege on their commitment because of a situation that is beyond their control”—on some shipments August 1.

The next day, FENOCO appealed to the Superior Tribunal in Bogotá to declare the strike illegal, accusing Sintramienergética of “serious irregularities” in the voting for the strike and of not following established norms for carrying out the action.

The union agreed to resume talks with management on August 2.

Costa Rican state employees march against electricity privatization plans

Some 10,000 protesters, mostly workers for the state-run Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) and local electricity cooperatives, marched July 30 against plans to privatize the country's electricity services.

Dressed in the traditional yellow of ICE workers, the protesters first marched to the Legislative Assembly to urge lawmakers to withdraw a pending bill, similar to a telecommunications bill passed last year that would open electrical generation and services to private competition.

The marchers then went to the Presidential House to present documents to President Laura Chinchilla criticizing the scheme and warning that privatization could bankrupt ICE.

Jamaican airlift handlers strike over impasse in negotiations

Airlift handlers at Jamaica's two international airports walked off the job on August 1 over lack of progress in

wage talks. The workers, who unload baggage and handle cargo at Norman Manley International in Kingston and Sangster International in Montego Bay, are members of the National Workers Union (NWU).

The workers struck to protest the stalemate between the union and the management of Airlift Handlers Limited over wages, frozen for three years, and benefits. Nation News quoted NWU president Vincent Morrison: "We have been negotiating with the company for a little under three years to be exact. The company has flatly refused to assist the employees and we have put a number of reasonable proposals to the company and the workers decided to take industrial action."

Tentative agreement in Indiana roofers' strike

The union representing striking roofers in Northwest Indiana and a contractors association reached a tentative agreement back on July 19 over wages and dues collection. Some 300 members of the United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers and Allied Workers Local 26 will vote on the new agreement August 6.

The agreement ended picketing in the strike that began on June 1. However, neither side has revealed the extent of issues that led to the strike. One issue that presented a roadblock was the fact that Indiana became the twenty-third right-to-work state in the United States this year. The law, which went into effect on March 14, absolves companies of the responsibility for automatic dues check-off, whereby union dues are deducted directly from workers' paychecks.

It is believed that member roofing companies of the Northwest Indiana Roofing Contractors Association will continue to collect dues from members of Local 26, but new language has been added to the contract to avoid future lawsuits over the issue.

Seattle drivers for Waste Management approve new contract

The 150 members of Teamsters Local 117, who collect yard waste and recycled items for Seattle residents and businesses, ratified a new 6-year agreement August 2,

ending an eight-day strike. Local 117 members originally struck to gain parity with members of Teamsters Local 174, who make \$9 an hour more hauling trash than the recycling drivers make.

Local 174 drivers walked out in sympathy with the striking workers, causing a backup of garbage collection. Under contract with the city of Seattle, Waste Management began facing fines up to \$1.25 million one day before the contract was ratified. The company had threatened to hire replacement workers unless the Teamsters came to an agreement.

According to reports, Waste Management allowed for \$500,000 more in wages and benefits in order to settle the agreement. But that will not achieve parity for the striking drivers. It will be six months before drivers see their first pay increase and a \$2,000 signing bonus originally promised to workers was withdrawn.

B.C. government workers walk out

In an ongoing campaign by unionized government employees in British Columbia, 180 workers in various ministries across the province staged a one-day strike early this week to press for a new contract.

The workers, who are represented by the B.C. Government and Services Employees' Union in four different cities, are employed in the Ministries of Labour, Health and Environment, Agriculture and Forests, among others. Main issues in the dispute center on wages and pensions, with the government refusing increases to keep pace with inflation.

The workers have been without a contract since March and their union has limited job action to one-day strikes while trying to convince the government of other ways to save money.



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