

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 August 2012

Colombian coal transport workers return to job after 25-day strike

On August 17, 246 workers for Colombian railway Fenoco, which transports coal from northern mines to coastal terminals, ended a strike begun July 23. The workers voted in assembly on August 15 to end the strike a day after a labor court in Bogotá declared the strike illegal and ordered the workers to hold a general assembly to reconsider the strike.

The workers' union, Sintraime, called the strike over demands for a wage increase, labor stability, respect for rights of association, industrial security and environmental improvements. The stoppage caused major disruptions in coal deliveries, with some firms declaring *force majeure* and clamoring for the courts to intervene.

A union attorney told reporters, "We hope that now the enterprise at least complies with the workers' rights and that it doesn't carry out any reprisals, and that the workers can do their jobs in peace and without friction with the other syndicate," alluding to the Sintravifer railway workers union.

The vote included authorization for Sintraime to file a request for an arbitration tribunal—composed of a union official, a company representative and a government functionary—to settle the issue.

Argentinean subway workers end 10-day strike

Members of the Subway and Premetro Workers' Union Association (AGTSyP) ended their strike in Buenos Aires on August 13 after union negotiators reaching an interim agreement with the subway concession Metrovías. The workers walked out on August 4 over lack of progress in negotiations over working conditions and salaries, with Metrovías adamantly refusing to consider the salary demand of 28 percent.

While a union press release claimed that the agreement

includes "improvements in labour conditions, an amendment to the rules regarding day licenses and restructure of salaries that allow for the solution of the conflict," the salary issue remains unresolved. Workers returned to the job on August 14 as AGTSyP and Metrovías continued negotiations.

Honduran teachers protest over pension, pay, legislation

Major thoroughfares in a number of Honduran cities were blockaded by thousands of teachers on August 17. The protests, called by the FOMH educators federation demanded the repeal of a law that changes teachers' pension plan and of the recently legislated Fundamental Law of Education, which undermines many of the teachers' labor rights and opens the door for privatization. The teachers also demand the payment of long overdue salaries.

Teachers have faced ongoing attacks from the administration of Porfirio Lobo since the ousting of Manuel Zelaya in a US-sponsored coup in 2009: defunding of their pension fund by \$159 million, firings, docking of pay as well as delays in salary payments. They have also been targeted for arrests, tear gas, beatings and murder.

At the same time, the regime has demonized the teachers and accused them of ignoring the needs of their students by taking to the streets. The media presents the changes in the laws as necessary to improve children's education.

Fomh has called for more protests this week.

Peruvian doctors' strike enters third week

Doctors in the Peruvian Essalud social security system remain on strike over demands for salary raises, infrastructure improvements and provision of better equipment and medicines.

The Labor Ministry has vilified the doctors, calling their strike illegal and blaming them for backlogs of patients at

hospitals throughout the country. In response, Cristian Miranda, President of the Medical Corps of the Guillermo Almenara Hospital, told reporters, “the authorities have not paid attention to our just demands.”

She added, “Our demand is for the vindication of our patients, for having just treatment towards them, and that we are given the tools to be able to give them quality treatment.”

Michigan gravel pit workers enter second month on strike

Workers at Grand Rapids Gravel Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have been on strike since July 19 against a massive \$6 an hour concession package. Management has demanded the slashing of 50-75 percent of vacations, abolition of retiree health benefits, and base overtime on anything over 40 hours a week instead of 8 hours a day.

Teamsters Local 406, which represents the heavy equipment operators and truck drivers, has offered the company \$3.26 an hour in cuts in exchange for retaining the old health care plan. But the company has now moved to hire replacement workers and brought on board a union-busting security service.

The old agreement expired in September of last year, and union and management held 15 negotiating sessions. The last raise for workers was a 50 cent-an-hour hike back in 2004.

Foreman shoots construction worker over demand for paycheck

A construction worker in Austin, Texas was shot twice after he confronted his foreman at a construction site over back pay. Miguel Angel Torres, a 33-year-old foreman, is charged with aggravated assault and is behind bars in lieu of \$250,000 bail.

Lening Ochoa, the 22-year-old construction worker, went to an Austin construction site to inquire of Torres about his paycheck. The two went to a nearby park. When the discussion became heated, Torres pulled out a gun and shot Ochoa in the back as he sought to walk away. Both Ochoa and Torres are undocumented.

B.C. Government workers step up strike action

In an ongoing campaign to bring pressure on the Liberal government of British Columbia to negotiate a new contract, over 450 workers across the province will go on strike this week in various offices of the Ministry of Forests.

This is the third and largest work stoppage staged this summer by the union representing government workers, The BC Government Employees' Union (BCGEU) whose 25,000 members have been without a contract since March.

The two sides remain far apart in bargaining with the union seeking a 3.5 percent wage increase in the first year of a new contract and the province offering to spread that increase over two years.

B.C. Credit Union workers to strike

Thirty-five workers employed at Heritage Credit Union and HG Insurance in southern British Columbia are set to go on strike this week after being without a contract since the end of May and having rejected the final contract offer on July 18.

The central issue for workers in the dispute is the unilateral imposition of cuts to pension benefits two years ago by the employer. The workers at branches in Castlegar and Slocan Park B.C., are represented by the United Steelworkers union (USW) whose negotiators say the company is refusing to address the issue of pension cuts.



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