

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 September 2012

Mexican silver miners' strike nears two-month mark

A strike by silver miners in the La Plata mine in Mexico's northern state of Durango continues despite police and military efforts to break it. The workers, members of the SNTMMSRM national miners union, went on strike on July 8, accusing the company, Canadian-owned Exxellon Resources Inc., of trying to impose another union on the miners. Local landowners, angered at broken promises the company had made to them, joined in the strike and blockade of the mine.

On August 29, around 100 police officers and soldiers breached a picket line at the mine's entrance, allowing an unreported number of scabs to enter. The next day, an Exxellon press release claimed that it had regained access to the mine and that operations were returning to normal. However, Exxellon has called the strike illegal and is seeking prosecution of the strikers.

Striking Colombian dockworkers attacked by riot police

On August 28, some 500 dockworkers, members of the UP port workers union in the Colombian port city of Buenaventura, went on strike after 20 days of negotiations with the TECSA shipping company failed to achieve any of their demands. The next day, riot police attacked a group of striking workers and seriously injured four male workers as well as a pregnant female worker. Three strikers were arrested, but were released the next day.

Although salary demands figured large in the fruitless negotiations, an equally important issue was TECSA's use of contract labor through a "temporary agency" that allowed the firm to avoid paying benefits, mistreat workers and frustrate organizing efforts.

TECSA is well known for its exploitative labor practices and its resistance to changing them. According to a hueintheworld.wordpress.com report: "Earlier this year, TECSA was forced to employ 110 workers directly due to political pressure pursuant to the U.S.-Colombia Labor Action Plan (LAP). Another 50 workers employed by TECSA are still denied direct contracts."

The LAP, declared by Barack Obama in April to have brought significant improvements for Colombian workers, has actually done little to advance their living standards or human rights. In fact, according to the blog's report, "since April 2011 when the Plan was first announced, 34 trade unionists have been killed and another 566 have received death threats. Among those recently receiving death threats are the leadership of the Port Workers Union in Buenaventura and Turbo ports. The Colombian government's response has been wholly inadequate."

Buenaventura accounts for about 60 percent of import/export traffic in Colombia, coming to about 520,000 containers yearly, of which TECSA handles around 85 percent. As of August 31, the strike remained in force, with a group of cane cutters joining in the action to demand better wages and working conditions.

Argentinean teachers strike, march to protest sacking of colleagues

Teachers in Buenos Aires struck on August 31 and marched down the city's Avenida de Mayo to protest the dismissal of a group of teachers. The teachers are members of the UTE-CTERA educators federation, who estimated adherence to the action at between 85 and 90 percent. Education Minister Esteban Bullrich claimed that the number was more like 35 percent.

The teachers' dismissals were the result of a performance that included parodies of Bullrich and Buenos Aires's right-wing mayor, Mauricio Macri. The parodies were filmed and later published online.

At a gathering in front of city government headquarters, a union official denounced Macri: "He punishes us and persecutes us because the public school is not a business, because it is a social and human right."

Argentinean port workers' strike over salaries cut short by labor ministry decree

Workers at shipping terminals in Buenos Aires and other port cities struck in the early hours of August 30, interrupting the loading of grain and its byproducts. The workers, members of the Receivers of Grain and Byproducts Union (Urgara), carry out quality control and weighing duties for outbound grain and its derivatives.

The workers were demanding a salary adjustment to counteract the effects of inflation, which has been around 25 percent annually in Argentina.

Within a short time, the Labor Ministry ordered the workers to return to work and decreed an "obligatory conciliation" (order to suspend the protest to negotiate), with a tripartite meeting to take place that afternoon.

Urgara immediately complied. One regional Urgara delegate told reporters, "The measure was complied with; people are working normally."

CEO meets with AFL-CIO head over Wisconsin strike

The CEO for the strikebound Palermo's Pizza plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, met with AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka August 31. A spokesperson for Palermo said that CEO Giacomo Fallucca "had a good meeting" and "appreciates Trumka's taking the time to meet."

The AFL-CIO issued a complementary statement saying, "Trumka appreciated the opportunity to sit down" as well, and added, "The workers at Palermo are eager to be part of a solution that creates a healthy business..."

Workers struck June 1 after the company rejected a union certification election where 179 out of 200 workers voted to form a union. Since then the company has fired a number of workers and about 100 remain on strike.

Meanwhile, the AFL-CIO has done nothing to mobilize a broad movement of the working class behind the strike and instead issued the call for a national boycott of Palermo's Pizza, including a brand sold by Costco.

Ohio refinery workers strike persists

The strike by 240 workers at the Husky Energy gasoline refinery in Lima, Ohio is well into its fourth month with negotiations proceeding slowly, according to press reports. Members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 624 walked off the job back on May 25 over what the union called "local issues" and "not wages".

At the beginning of the dispute, the USW revealed that it was an unfair labor practices strike and that the union had filed 23 charges with the National Labor Relations Board. At the beginning of the year the USW had completed pattern agreements with a group of individual refineries.

Rumor had it that the clash with Husky Energy was largely forced upon the USW officials by rank-and-file concerns over safety issues after an accumulated 18 deaths throughout the industry since 2009. Husky is continuing production at the Lima plant through the use of salaried workers.

Province-wide strike action to hit B.C.

Twenty-seven thousand public sector workers in various unions across British Columbia will stage a one-day strike on September 5 to protest wholesale cuts in wages and benefits workers have suffered in recent years as they fight to negotiate new contracts.

Workers with the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU) have been without a contract since March and are joined in this action by the Professional Employees Association (PEA) and the Canadian Office & Professional Employees Union (COPE).

Union leaders say that, following a wage freeze, workers have faced a real cut of over 5 percent in wages in the last two years and that the government's latest offer would see wages fall further in real terms. The strike will affect a wide range of services at 1,785 government sites in 153 centers across the province.

University of Victoria facing strike action

Support workers at the University of Victoria served strike notice last week that will put them in a legal strike position as of September 5, the same day public sector unions across the province will stage their walkout.

The 1,500 workers affected include technical staff, child-care workers and skilled trades, among others, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The two locals have been working without a contract since 2010 and the main areas of dispute include job security, wages and protection against inflation.

Although strike notice was first served in June, job action was delayed pending a decision on essential service staffing levels. Union leaders have indicated that a number of job actions short of a strike may also be under consideration to bring pressure on the University for a settlement.

Quebec hotels facing strike action

The union representing 5,500 workers at 35 hotels across the Province of Quebec is calling for a one-day strike on September 9 to protest an impasse in negotiations, which has seen workers locked out at several Montreal hotels throughout the summer, including two hotels which locked out their workers last week.

A spokesman for the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN) has said that government inspectors have identified a number of replacement workers being used throughout the ongoing job actions, despite laws prohibiting such employment. Key issues in dispute include job protection, wages and pensions.



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