Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 May 2013

Brazilian dockworkers strike over privatization legislation

Stevedores at the southern Brazilian ports of Santos, Rio de Janeiro and Paranaguá held a "flash strike" at noon on May 14 to protest grain terminal privatization legislation being debated in the national Senate after passage by the lower house of Congress. The strike took place in the midst of a backlog of soybeans, grain and corn waiting for export, with over 200 vessels awaiting loading. Container traffic, however, was the most affected by the action.

The proposed legislation had been promoted by the Rousseff administration as a means of modernizing the port, increasing private investment and easing bottlenecks and delays. The bill would also ease regulations for the construction of private terminals, which would mostly take place in the north.

According to a report in *DTN/Progressive Farmer*, "President Dilma Rousseff optimistically predicted they would trigger a $25 billion spending spree on ports."

The stevedores fear that the legislation would affect their job security and labor rights. The main provision opposed by the dockworkers' union would take the power to pick workers at private terminals out of the unions' hands.

Union officials expressed hopes that the strikes would spread to other ports along the northern coast, but they did not. The strikes ended by May 16. On the night of May 17, the Senate approved the bill.

Mexican credit union workers strike over salary, benefit issues

Workers for Mexico's Caja de Ahorros de Telefonistas de Telmex (Telmex Telephone Operators' Credit Union) struck on May 16 over lack of progress in salary and benefit talks between the credit union's administration and union representatives.

The credit union board offered a "last and definitive" raise of 4.2 percent in salary and 1.5 percent in benefits in addition to a productivity bonus. The union is calling for a 7 percent salary hike and improvements in working conditions and benefits.

Four-day strike by Mexican hospital workers

At least 50 doctors and nurses at the Aurelio Valdeviso civil hospital in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca walked out on May 13. The strike was called over a number of demands submitted to the state government, including the provision of more medications and supplies, infrastructure improvements and better salaries and benefits.

Nurses, doctors and auxiliary workers bearing banners and handwritten signs demonstrated in front of the hospital, calling on the state governor, Gabino Cué, to address the problems. As is customary with hospital strikes, emergency and hospitalization services remained in operation.

"It bears pointing out that Hospital Civil employees have shown that many times the equipment is damaged either by the high load of use or the lack of capacity and care for their operation," reported e-oaxaca.com. Alfonso Echeverría, head of Subsection 07 of Section 35 of the National Health Secretariat Workers Union (SNTSS), complained to reporters that for over a year the union has been raising with both the federal and state governments issues like overcrowding, lack of critical medications for diabetics and the terminally ill, lack of detergent and torn sheets and towels.

Hospital director Miguel Ángel Colmenares claimed that the situation was not as dire as claimed and that increased funds for the hospital would be in the next state budget. He criticized the workers, claiming they were putting the patients at risk.

He was joined in his criticisms by National Health Workers Union (SNTE) Section 35 head Jenoé Ruiz López, who called the strike "unjustified," and warned about "dark intentions to generate destabilization in the sector, with an eye to the next change in the sectional committee."

On May 17, the workers returned to their jobs, after Cué agreed to sack Colmenares—the hospital's third director in as many years—and submit him to an investigation for bad management, and to release a short-term infusion of 200 million pesos (US$16 million) to address the workers' demands. In addition, he agreed to pay a salary increase to nurses and contract employees and initiate infrastructure improvements.

Trinidadian construction workers thwarted again by management, union, Labour Ministry

On April 28, 350 nonunion contract workers, building an extension of a highway along Trinidad's western coast for Brazilian construction company Constructora OAS, struck over a raft of complaints including unsafe and unsanitary conditions, low wages, lack of overtime and travel payments, no salary reviews, lack of first aid kits and hiring of nonlocal workers.

Management's refusal to address these issues led the workers to call on the Oilfield Workers' Trade Union (OWTU) for help. Union official Aaron Moyne, after a four-hour meeting with management, persuaded the workers to return to the job, saying that the firm "agreed to revisit" the problems for 13 days.

Fifteen days later, management brandished a survey report from the Employers' Consultative Association that, according to a *Trinidad Express* report, "concluded that the compensation packages being offered the highway workers were consistent with and in some cases, superior to what was being offered in the local construction sector." Thus, there would be no changes.

The workers protested this "slap in the face," but Labour Minister Errol McLeod "asked" the workers not to take strike action while he mediated on May 17. Moyne, who admitted that the workers were "disappointed," agreed with McLeod's advice that "workers return to some state of normalcy … The final decision is to really show due respect to the process and also to the minister to allow him to do his work."

Moyne added, "While the representatives are advocating on their behalf, the workers have a further concession. They are trying to be reasonable, to give this thing enough time to work," doubtless at Moyne's urging, "and see what possible outcome will come out of this," he said. Moyne said he hoped McLeod would be able to "advise the company accordingly to let good sense prevail."

Lockout of Oregon longshore workers at Port of Portland

Columbia Grain locked out 75 members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) on May 4 at the Port of Portland's Terminal 5 in Oregon. Bruce Holte, the president of Local 8 who also serves as a commissioner for the Port of Portland, says the current impasse is due to work rules and safety standards.

The previous agreement between Columbia Grain and ILWU Local 8 expired back on September 29, 2012. Workers voted by 94 percent to reject a new contract and in December the company imposed the agreement.

Rather than strike, the ILWU has been conducting a slowdown using a work-to-rule tactic. The company responded by using management and temporary replacement workers to operate the terminal. Columbia Grain chose to lock out workers during a relatively slow period. In the fall, grain exports increase dramatically in the Northwest portion of the United States and Canada.

On February 27, United Grain Corporation locked out ILWU members in Vancouver over an agreement that imposed 12-hour shifts and has contract language that will permit the company to bypass the ILWU in hiring terminal labor. Japan's Marubeni Corporation owns Columbia Grain.

San Francisco Giants concession workers reject contract, authorize strike vote

Concessions workers at San Francisco's AT&T Park voted by a 97 percent margin to strike against a new contract offer that caps medical benefits. Previously, the 750 cashiers, cooks and food sellers at the Giants baseball park had all health care benefits covered by their employer, Centerplate Inc.

Workers, who have been without a contract for three years and have gone without a wage increase for several years, also rejected a meager 25 cent wage increase in each year for the first two years of the new agreement. The vote by members of UNITE HERE Local 2 was 500 to 16 to strike.

Alberta Government imposes contract on teachers

The Conservative government of Alberta last week introduced legislation imposing a four-year deal on the province's teachers, after some bargaining units and school boards voted to reject the latest offer.

The imposed deal would freeze teachers' pay for three years and cut millions from provincial education funding even as the student population swells. The Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) had already agreed to the concession-laden deal governing the province's 40,000 teachers, but nevertheless expressed dismay at the government move.

The action follows a similar move in Ontario, effectively stripping teachers of the right to collective bargaining. Alberta teachers had been without a contract since last August.

Saskatoon library workers get belated contract

Library workers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan finally have a new, albeit expired, contract after working without one for over three years. Ironically, the new contract expired over a month ago and negotiations have not yet begun for the next one.

The deal brings some increases to the lowest paid employees who currently work for minimum wage. Library workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have become known at Saskatoon city hall meetings in recent weeks for staging what have been termed "hushed protests" as they sit in large numbers holding protest signs while silently reading books.