

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 August 2013

Latin America

Brazilian airport workers strike over wages, benefits, privatization plans

Workers at Brazil's 63 state-run airports began a strike July 31. The workers, members of the National Union of Airport employees or SINA, are demanding a raise of 16 percent, as opposed to the 6.49 percent offered by the Infraero federal air travel agency. The workers are also calling for better benefits.

In addition to the wage and benefit demands, the workers are protesting against president Dilma Rousseff's plans to bring in private investors to update existing airports in anticipation of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics. Last December, Rousseff announced plans to privatize two airports in September of this year.

The strike has been hampered from the beginning by August 1 federal labor court rulings that all air traffic controllers, 70 percent of security and operations workers and at least 40 percent of other staff must stay on the job at the affected airports. The court also threatened to fine SINA 50,000 reais (US\$22,000) if it did not obey the rulings. The union has fully complied.

Nonetheless, some postponements and cancellations did occur, with 26 and 31.6 percent of internal and international flights, respectively, postponed. Cancellations accounted for 5 and 3.4 percent. The workers plan to remain on strike until at least August 6.

Strike by Chilean trash collectors over pay, conditions

More than 34,000 waste collection workers in Chile's metropolitan areas stopped work on July 29 to press their demand for better wages. At the three main landfills in the Metropolitan Region--Santa Marta, Santiago Poniente and Lomas Los Colorados--garbage truck drivers blocked the entrances.

The workers, members of the Federation of Contract Cleaners, Gardeners and Waste Collectors (Fenasina), placed better pay first among their demands. Most waste collection services are contracted by the government to private companies, and pay in the industry is abysmal.

According to a July 30 *Santiago Times* article, "a street sweeper earns less than the minimum wage--currently set at 193,000 pesos, roughly US\$377--and the waste collectors rely on people's tips to top up their 250,000 pesos (US\$490) salaries. Truck drivers earn 400,000 pesos, or US\$782, and want their salaries pushed to 700,000 pesos (US\$1,370) which is the salaries drivers in other industries are paid."

Other demands include job stability, improved working conditions--14-hour days are not uncommon--and protection for the workers' health.

In the early morning of July 31, Subsecretary of Regional Development Miguel Flores stepped out of a meeting with Fenasina official Marcelo López to announce the creation of a board to address the issues within 60 days. Fenasina called the workers back to the job, and trucks began rolling later that day.

Fenasina president Armando Soto described the agreement as "historic and essential" for "regulating and improving working conditions," a view not shared by many workers, who were not notified of the accord until after it was signed. Some angry workers called for sacking López and continuing the strike.

Paraguayan doctors march to demand unpaid salaries, provision of equipment and supplies

Over 250 doctors from the National Hospital in Asunción, Paraguay marched and demonstrated July 30 to demand the payment of salaries delayed since May. It was the second time in a week that the doctors had taken to the streets.

The protesting doctors also demanded an end to the shortages of supplies and medications, and the upgrading of deteriorated infrastructure. Since last year, the hospital has gone without an echocardiography device, tracheal tubes and essential medicines. Patients often have to wait two or three months for appointments, or they are told to seek private help.

Due to the crisis at the hospital, some of the doctors already have agreed to cut back their hours. However, the doctors are now collectively discussing the possibility of calling a general strike if the delays continue.

Paraguayan electrical workers march against privatization

On August 1, workers for the National Electricity Administration of Paraguay marched through downtown Asunción to voice opposition to plans to open the sector to privatization. The law that would privatize electricity production and commercialization of service is currently being debated in Paraguay's lower house of Congress, the Chamber of Deputies.

According to an Argenpress report, "The private national or foreign enterprise that invests in this lucrative business will even be able to intervene in the commercialization of surplus energy belonging to Paraguay proceeding from binational hydroelectric plants, now sold to Argentina and Brazil."

The Workers Syndicate, which represents the state electrical workers, expressed fears that the privatizations will result in massive layoffs and in a spike in costs for consumers.

Union leader José Pineda said that similar protests would take place during the month, not only in Asunción, but also in other departments throughout the country. The protests will culminate in a massive

demonstration--which Pineda predicted would draw 15,000 people--to show opposition to the privatization law.

Venezuelan steelworkers stage 24-hour strike over unpaid wages

Steelworkers for the Venezuelan steel corporation Sidor brought operations to a halt on July 31 to press their demand for the complete payment of benefits and extra days according to their contract. The workers are members of the SUTISS steelworkers union.

President Nicolás Maduro approved the disbursement of the payments established under article 142 of the Organic Law of Labor. However, no date had been confirmed for depositing the payments by July 30, the annual deadline stipulated in the collective contract.

Sidor, one of the most important steel industry firms in the world, argues that low production is the reason for the delay in the payments, a claim that SUTISS has rejected.

The United States

Contract extension ends strike at Philadelphia Convention Center

The Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia offered a one-year contract extension August 2 that brought an end to a one-day strike by Local 8 of the Carpenters Union. Convention Center negotiators were seeking to implement a new "Exhibitor Bill of Rights" that would have broken the monopoly by the unions over setup work at the Center and allowed exhibitors to perform some of the labor using cheaper labor and new technology.

The picket line set up by carpenters was honored by other workers, virtually shutting down the Convention Center before the opening of the American Association of Diabetes Educators convention which would have brought 10,000 attendees to Philadelphia. The contract extension represents a temporary retreat by the Convention Center.

In 2011 the Pennsylvania CC opened a new \$780 million expansion to attract both national and international clients and it is engaged in a campaign to cut costs. Ed Coryell Sr., who heads the Carpenters District Council, was recently appointed to the Convention Center's 15-member board with an eye to collaborating in imposing cuts on workers to create a low-cost environment for convention exhibitors.

Negotiations continue in Phoenix bus strike

Talks between the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and First Transit continued over the weekend as the strike by 400 transit drivers crippled the east-metropolitan area of Phoenix, Arizona. Members of Local 1433 of the ATU voted by 95 percent to reject First Transit's offer and workers hit the picket line August 1.

The major issue that provoked the strike was "management rights" contract language. In the words of one driver who spoke to the *Arizona Republic*, management "wants to control how we look, how we dress, how we talk, and it's up to them to say, 'I want to keep this person or I want to fire this person,' and the union can't do anything but sit in on the meeting. That's wrong."

First Transit, a United Kingdom-based company that also operates First

Student and Greyhound, won a three-year agreement with the Phoenix-area Valley Metropolitan Regional Transit Authority with a bid that undercut a rival by \$36 million.

According to reports from the ATU, it believes that the contract between Valley Metro and First Transit would allow Valley Metro to order the company to abrogate contract language that would allow unilateral termination of jobs, wages and work hours.

On the evening of the first day of the strike, the ATU claimed that it had a tentative agreement that resolved the management rights issue. First Transit negotiator Nick Promponas expected the strike to end the following day, August 2, but there was no resolution as of August 4.

Canada

Quebec municipal workers take job action

130 workers employed by the City of Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, south of Montreal, instituted an overtime strike last Friday, with the aim of pressuring city negotiators to respond to a contract proposal tabled by the union in June.

The workers involved in the action are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been without a contract since the end of 2011. Union leaders say that they have adopted a "flexible approach" to meet the city's concerns and that the last major issue to be resolved is pensions.

Last month workers voted unanimously in favor of strike action, but union negotiators say they hope that the overtime ban will lead to a quick settlement.

Striking Ontario steelworkers reject contract--again

Workers at U.S. Steel's Nanticoke plant, south of Hamilton, Ontario, last week voted to reject a 'final' contract offer from the company, making it the second time they have done so since over 1,000 steelworkers were locked out at the end of April.

The workers were locked out after refusing to accept company demands for a concessions-laden contract that included a wage freeze, the elimination of cost-of living allowances and cuts to vacation and other benefits. A company spokesperson expressed disappointment at the vote and said they would now be considering all their options.



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