Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 August 2013

Latin America

Partial strike by Chilean health workers over dire conditions in hospitals

Health workers at public hospitals in Chile began what was to be a two-day strike August 22 to bring attention to the woeful state of the hospital system and to demand better conditions and pay. The action, called by Fenats, the National Health Workers Federation, involved about 14,000 paramedics and technical, auxiliary and administrative staff.

Seventy-eight hospitals in the northern and central regions of Tarapaca, Coquimbo, Metropolitana, Valparaiso y Biobio, and Provincial de Rancagua were struck. Fenats claimed a 75 percent participation rate, though *Radio Biobio* reported that the hospitals "functioned normally and without major complications for the clients." In fact, workers were designated for "ethical shifts" in which delays occurred, but services were provided.

In the capital Santiago, some 500 workers marched downtown to the Public Assistance Hospital. Protesters marched in cities in all five regions. Several unions, among them those of metallurgical, postal and bank employees, voiced support for the strike.

A Fenats director told *Prensa Latina*, "It is not possible that we continue having hospitals that don't have supplies, personnel, specialists, infrastructure, up-to-date technology. The crisis is not only in emergency services but is generalized in all the nation's hospitals." The federation is also calling for a "worthy" salary raise.

The strike was cut short when, according to Fenats spokesman Jorge Faundez, "the subsecretary of networks called from abroad to give instructions to the [Health] Minister to dock the pay of the two days of strike, before the two days had even been concluded." Under this threat, the workers returned to the job in the middle of the second day. Faundez told reporters that "we'll have to wait a couple of weeks to see what response the Ministry gives us" to proposals dating back to April before deciding on further action.

Panamanian teachers unions end strike after 24 days

On August 23, seven striking teachers unions and Panama's Education Ministry (Meduca) signed an agreement ending a strike begun July 30 against Decree 920, a law that would lead to privatizations and the erosion of teachers' rights, job security and living standards.

The strike was not supported by seven of Panama's 16 teachers' unions, which carried on negotiations and told their members to continue working during the strike. When Education Minister Lucy Molinar rescinded Decree 920 on August 9, the striking unions stayed out, demanding a signed promise from Molinar that there would be no retaliation against them and that a high-level commission would be formed to attend to problems in the school system. Molinar refused and seven of the unions remained out. Molinar was not present at the signing of the agreement.

According to a critica.com.pa report, "The accord contains a firm commitment on the part of the teachers to recover the academic content or a system of compensation for lost time." Two other points are in the agreement: a promise not to retaliate in any way against striking teachers and the formation of a special commission to begin 30 days after the signing of the accord.

Mexican teachers clash with police in protests against education reform law

Some 2,000 teachers gathered outside the Congress in Mexico City on August 19 to protest against three education reform bills under debate. The educators, members of the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE)—usually described as a dissident split-off from the National Education Workers Syndicate (SNTE)—oppose the bill as threatening teachers' job security, rights, working conditions and salaries, and opening the door to further privatization of education.

That night, some of the protesters managed to slip into the Congress building, the San Lazaro Palace. Police and teachers clashed, resulting in about a dozen injuries. Police spokespersons claimed that the teachers had committed acts of vandalism and that "there was aggression" on the part of the teachers. Protesters remained in an encampment outside the palace.

The Senate, which had moved to a different location, passed two of the bills altering the General Education Law and the National Institute of Educational Evaluation Organic Law on August 23. That day, denouncing the "treason" of the legislators, 5,000 CNTE members blocked the main access route to Mexico City International Airport, slowing traffic but prevented by 1,700 heavily armed federal and municipal police from getting closer to the terminals.

The SNTE, whose president Elba Esther Gordillo faces embezzlement and organized crime charges, welcomed the laws, claiming that they would preserve workers' rights and guarantee quality education.

Trinidadian oil workers protest suspensions

Gantry workers demonstrated at Trinidad's National Petroleum (NP) head office in Sea Lots, Port-of-Spain on August 19 and 20 against suspensions of their coworkers. The workers, members of the Oil Fields Workers Trade Union (OWTU), were suspended following two days of strike action August 13 and 14 against management plans to contract their work out to private firms.

NP called the strike illegal, since it was not called over wage negotiations, and claimed that there were no plans to privatize any of its

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functions. On August 20, NP reported the union to the Industrial Court for an industrial relations offense.

OWTU President Ancel Roget accused NP of moving to privatize some of its operations in the interests of “friends of the government.”

United States

Teamsters submit California truck strike to mediator

Truck drivers in Fontana and Compton, California ended their three-day strike August 19 against U.S. Reddaway after the union leadership agreed to submit their grievance to a mediator. The 250 workers struck six months ago after a majority signed cards to obtain representation by Teamsters Local 63.

During this period no meaningful negotiations have taken place. The first meeting with a mediator was to have begun on August 21.

U.S. Reddaway was acquired by YRC Worldwide along with several other trucking companies a number of years ago, saddling the company with significant debt. The Teamsters agreed to defer raises and pension fund contributions for truckers under a union contract with YRC.

Three-day strike by California city workers ends

A three-day strike by Hayward, California city workers ended August 15 without any agreement by city negotiators to back off concession demands. Some 350 members of the Service Employees International Union Local 1021 are opposed to the city’s demands for a two-year wage freeze and a hike in workers’ contributions to medical and retirement benefit plans.

City officials declared the strike led to “no productive resolution” and declared it would not agree to the continuation of “unsustainable costs of health care and employee retirement.” The SEIU and the city have been in negotiations since February of this year and the old contract agreement expired in April.

The city reacted to the strike by declaring it would hire temporary workers to replace strikers. On the strike’s second day, the driver of a van struck a picket while trying to break through a picket line. The condition of the picket was not known at the time.

Teamsters sell out California transit strike

Lake County, California transit workers voted to return to work August 15, one day after the pleadings of Teamsters Local 665 officials failed to obtain support from the Lake Transit Authority Board to intervene and help settle the 18-day strike. The union agreed to an unconditional return to work by the 28 striking transit workers.

Paratransit Services, which holds the contract with the county, declared that it will retain replacement workers and restore striking workers back to their jobs from a preferential hiring list as needed.

The strike broke out back on July 29 when Paratransit refused to restore “temporary” concessions made by the union to the company in 2010 when workers gave up stepwise wage increases. The Teamsters union attempted to cover their retreat by getting agreement from the company to accept mediation by the federal government.

At the August 14 meeting of the Lake Transit Authority Board, Teamsters officials appealed to the board to return striking workers to their jobs, support binding arbitration and set up a fact-finding group to help settle the strike. “I hate to say that our hands are tied,” said Martin Scheel, a board member and Lakeport City councilman. “But in many aspects they are.”

Buffalo bakery workers enter 10th week of strike against concessions

Local 36G of the Bakery Union met with a federal mediator August 14 as five workers entered their 10th week on strike against Al Cohen’s Bakery. The company has demanded the scrapping of health care coverage and is also seeking to get out of the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco & Grain Millers union pension plan.

The meeting with the federal mediator by the union is aimed at crafting a concessions package acceptable to management. But Mark DiDomenico, one of the owners of Al Cohen’s Bakery, declared, “I don’t see anything happening that’s going to change.”

The Bakery union’s pension fund suffered a severe blow following the bankruptcy and closure of Hostess Brands. In 2011, the pension program was only 72 percent funded before Hostess stopped making payments.

Canada

Tentative deal in Nanticoke steel lockout

With United Steelworkers union (USW) representatives saying they are not recommending it, a tentative five-year deal has been reached in the months-long lockout by workers at US Steel in Nanticoke, south of Hamilton, Ontario.

Workers at Lake Erie Works, who have been off the job since April, will review the deal and vote on it later this week. No details have been made public on the new deal, but at the end of July workers voted down a concessions-laden “final offer” brought to them by their union that would have frozen wages, cut benefits and vacation for new-hires.

Toronto Food workers strike

In a show of support, striking workers at Wing’s Food Products in Toronto, Ontario were joined on the picket line last week by members of their union, The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW).

One hundred forty workers at the food processing plant have been on strike since August 13 after days of mediated negotiations failed to show progress on a new contract. Central issues in dispute include job security, wages, work hours and vacation. In addition, union leaders cite proposed changes to grievance procedures as part of an ongoing challenge to union representation at the company.

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