

Workers Struggles—the Americas

24 September 2013

Colombian oil refinery construction workers' strike ends after pay agreement

Construction workers at an expansion project at Colombia's largest oil refinery ended a three-day strike Monday, winning pay increases of more than 40 percent. Some 10,000 workers, members of the Syndical Workers Union (USO), began to strike at 10:00 a.m. Friday and returned to work late on Monday.

The US-based Chicago Bridge and Iron Company (CB&I) has a US\$6.47 billion contract to double the capacity of state-run oil producer Ecopetrol's Reficar refinery in Cartagena by 2015.

According to a USO press release, negotiations—which had gone on for 20 days at the Ministry of Labor prior to the strike—“have been characterized by intransigent conduct and constant delaying maneuvers on the part of CB&I.”

USO president Rodolfo Vecino said CB&I's pay rate is far below comparable wages paid by other companies in the sector. The company has agreed to increase wages between 40 and 100 percent, depending on job classifications. The strike was the first in Columbia's oil sector in nine years.

Venezuela: Steelworkers strike to demand unpaid wages

Workers at Venezuela's major steel producer, Sidor, struck on September 19 to demand “accumulated debts” to the workers dating back to the period before the firm's nationalization in 2008. Workers had been partially striking and slowing production over the issue during the week before in various departments, culminating in a walkout throughout the plant on the 19th.

The delayed payments attributed to “errors of calculation” could represent a loss of up to 42 percent of the workers' incomes. Sidor employs more than 14,000 people.

The workers demand the signing of a document between the steelworkers' union, Sutiss, the state-owned heavy industry conglomerate CVG and Sidor that guarantees the

fulfillment of clause 8 of the collective contract covering the payment of back wages and contains a formula for their calculation and timeline.

According to a report in *El Nacional*, Sutiss, “which had not assumed the leadership of the conflict, decided to support the Sidor workers in their demand and convoked a general indefinite strike.” The newspaper also quoted a worker as saying that the union directorship has been “respecting the line of the executive board, but not that of the workers.”

That afternoon, Sutiss reps entered into negotiations with Sidor and CVG.

Brazilian bank employees strike over salary readjustment, conditions

A total of 490,000 private and public bank employees throughout Brazil walked off the job on September 19 to demand higher wages and benefits. The bank workers are members of the National Financial Branch Employees Confederation (Contraf).

Contraf called the strike after the fourth round of meetings with negotiators for the National Bank Federation (Fenaban) failed to reach an agreement. Contraf is calling for an 11.9 percent raise, as opposed to Fenaban's offer of 6.1 percent, which is barely above last year's inflation rate of 5.84 percent.

A Contraf official told reporters that the Brazilian banks have been making record profits, with the six major banks showing an 18 percent increase in the first half of 2013 compared to last year, and that the banks “have an obligation to present a proposal with socioeconomic conquests.” The bank workers also want improvements in profit-sharing plans.

Other demands include improved working conditions and an end to the use of part-time and temporary labor.

Mexican health workers strike over contract delays

Close to 1,500 health sector workers in Mexico's southern Istmo de Tehuantepec region held a 24-hour strike September 20 in support of demands by health workers who began a strike on September 10. The striking workers, members of National Health Workers Syndicate (SNTS) section 35, struck to protest the lack of response by the Oaxaca Health Services (SSO) agency to their demands.

Administrative workers at the Macedonio Benitez Fuentes general hospital in Juchitan, Oaxaca, joined the strike call, but due to a flood in the area, hospital medical staff continued to attend to patients.

The strike was called after continuing delays by employers in the implementation of an accord agreed to months ago. Oscar Gomez Hernandez, SNTS subsection 2 subsecretary general, told *El Sol Del Istmo* that the SSO has not carried out its promises, and named some of the unaddressed issues, primary among them the lack of medicine and supplies.

Judge orders end to Ohio and Pennsylvania railroad strike

A US District Court judge ordered 100 striking railroad engineers and conductors to end their strike September 21 against the Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway. Members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) walked off the job the previous day over the violation of contract language governing the requirement of two-person crews.

Wheeling & Lake Erie management manned a train on September 13 using only a supervisor, when the contract requires an engineer and a conductor. Judge John Adams said the union's characterization of the issue as a "major dispute" was inaccurate. He conditioned his temporary restraining order on the grounds that corporate management end their attempt to replace union workers with supervisors until another hearing can be held.

The BLET, a rail division of the Teamsters union, had banked on the passage of the Safe Freight Act, which would provide a federal mandate for two-person crews, but the measure is currently stalled in the US House of Representatives.

Alberta grocery chain facing strike

Across the province of Alberta, 8,500 workers employed by retail grocery giant Real Canadian Superstore could go on strike October 6 if a settlement is not reached before that deadline.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which represents workers at Superstores, served strike notice last week claiming that the company, while making some improvements in their latest offer, has refused to address the central issue in dispute, which is work hours and wages for part-time employees.

Around 80 percent of Superstore workers are part-time, and the company is demanding lower wage tiers for part-timers that would pay them between C\$4 and C\$7 an hour less than full-time employees.

Real Canadian Superstore is owned by Loblaw Companies Ltd., the largest food retailer in Canada. Workers at Superstore have been without a contract for more than a year.

Ontario: Strike by University of Windsor food service workers

Most food service at the University of Windsor was closed down as members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1001 refused to cross picket lines on Thursday.

The workers were supporting an 11-day strike by members of CUPE Local 1393. No new talks are set in the dispute. The main outstanding differences are over bumping rights and concessions on job evaluations.

Local 1393 is the bargaining agent for some 280 University of Windsor skilled trades workers, including plumbers, carpenters and technicians.



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