

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 May 2014

Latin America

Argentine metro workers strike over attack on guard

Following an attack on a guard working on the San Martín metro rail system in Buenos Aires, workers for Corredores Ferroviarios, which operates the line, struck to demand greater security May 9.

The cause of the strike was an incident in which a guard incurred injuries at the hands of thieves who stole a cellphone from a female passenger. When he attempted to get the phone back, he was grabbed and beaten. He was taken to the hospital, where he was treated for blows to the head and body.

The strike was called off at about 8:30 when the Rail Union and Corredores Ferroviarios reached an agreement on a new security plan.

Brazilian bus drivers strike for higher pay

About 70 percent of 9,000 buses in the state of Rio de Janeiro's commuter bus system were out of service due to a strike by drivers begun on May 8. Bus drivers held demonstrations and blocked roads as well.

Over 300 buses were vandalized, some pelted by rocks, others set on fire, during the industrial action, though there is disagreement over who—angry commuters, vandals or dissident union members—committed the destruction.

The drivers are demanding salary rises to around 2,500 reais (US\$1,100) a month.

The strike takes place as the June 12 kickoff date for the World Cup nears, and amid protests against the huge sums of money spent on the event as infrastructure and services lack funding. According to the World Bank, about 16 percent of Brazil's population of 200 million lived below the poverty line in 2012.

Panama Canal construction union ends strike, signs agreement

A strike begun by Panama's Suntracs construction union on April 23 ended May 8 with the union's signing of an agreement with the CAPAC employers association. The strike was called to demand higher wages for workers on the US\$5.25 billion Panama Canal expansion project.

Hourly wages for assistants, at the lower end of the pay scale, will rise in increments from \$2.75 to \$3.71 by 2017, while those of skilled workers at the higher end will rise from \$3.67 to \$5.00. These represent about a 26 percent raise, far below the 80 percent Suntracs demanded, and close to CAPAC's 25 percent offer. Panama's inflation rate has averaged 5

percent over the last four years.

Suntracs Secretary General Saul Mendez told reporters that the accord "dignifies the job construction workers do."

Costa Rican teachers strike, march for overdue pay

Teachers in Costa Rica struck May 5 over continuing delays in the payment of their salaries. Some 7,000 elementary schools teachers have not been paid since April 1, some since February. Hundreds of teachers carried signs and chanted as they marched from central San José to the Finance Ministry.

The National Association of Educators (ANDE), the Costa Rican Education Union (SEC) and the High School Teachers' Association (APSE) called the strike following a stalemated meeting with Education Ministry (MEP) head Leonardo Garnier.

MEP officials have claimed that the problems stem from kinks in a new payroll database, but the problem has lasted for months. Union web sites said that "we've had enough of the lack of action" by the MEP.

The strike also took place following the runoff presidential election of Luis Guillermo Solís, who ran as a "center-left" Citizens Action Party (PAC) candidate against PLN (National Liberation Party) candidate Johnny Araya Monge. Outgoing PLN president Laura Chinchilla Miranda earned teachers' and other workers' wrath for her administration's corruption scandals and agenda of privatization, tax hikes and minuscule pay increases for public workers.

Solís, who took office on May 8, has proclaimed himself in solidarity with the teachers, and claimed that his administration would have an "open door policy." On May 9, hundreds of teachers marched to the Presidential House, where they—or rather 18 union officials—were received by and held a meeting with new education minister Sonia Marta Mora.

Strike by Mexican university workers ends following arbitration board ruling

On May 8, sixty-eight days after going out on strike, the University of Sonora Workers and Employees Syndicate (STEUS) called its members back to work, following a general assembly meeting vote. The vote was called regarding the May 6 ruling by the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board (JLCyA) ordering the workers to end the strike.

The workers had voted for the strike February 28 after a hearing before the JLCyA failed to resolve the university administration's noncompliance with a number of contract clauses (see: 18 March 2014 Workers Struggles).

The University of Sonora, known as Unison, has six campuses in the Mexican state of Sonora with headquarters in the state capital, Hermosillo. Over 30,000 students attend its campuses.

STEUS secretary general Modesto Torres Valerio told reporters, “we did it for the students; nonetheless the struggle continues in the tribunals with the appeals that we promoted against the arbitrary decision emitted by the Conciliation and Arbitration Board.”

One dead, several injured from strike by Dominican residents

An 18-year-old resident of Higüey, a city in the Dominican Republic’s eastern Altagracia province, died from a bullet to the thorax on May 6. The shooting of Juan Carlos Jiménez occurred on the first day of a strike called by residents over a number of demands. Police wounded several others and arrested dozens more.

The neighborhood boards of Higüey had called a 48-hour strike on April 11 over longstanding demands that the government address critical needs of the area: construction of schools and a hospital, street repairs, improvements in trash collection, the completion of an aqueduct project that has been at a standstill, and the building of a bridge connecting Higüey with the Villa Cerro barrio. Another demand was the closure of a notorious jail in which 10 inmates have died.

Negotiations over the last month produced no results, so the boards called another two-day walkout, closing businesses and blocking traffic. A heavy police deployment brought on clashes that resulted in the death, injuries and arrests. As had happened in April, the local bishop intervened, and the strike was called off on the second day as talks resumed.

The United States

Philadelphia Convention Center rebuffs climb-down by unions

A last-minute attempt May 9 by union officials representing carpenters and Teamsters at the Philadelphia Convention Center to accept concessions was rejected by SMG, the center’s private management company. Four other unions that perform labor on convention center exhibits had previously signed contracts that accepted the new Customer Satisfaction Agreement, which will allow exhibitors to bring in lower-wage non-union labor to perform work.

SMG issued an ultimatum early in the day on May 5 demanding the Teamsters and Carpenters union agree to the new work rules by midnight that very day. But union officials believed contract extensions dated through May 10 would allow them additional time.

SMG declared, “Customers have indicated...that the status quo related to the Customer Satisfaction Agreement and work rules at the building is unacceptable and places us at a competitive disadvantage to peer facilities in other cities.” Management cited new agreements in cities like Detroit and Chicago that allow cheaper labor to service convention exhibits.

SMG said it expects the other four unions—Laborers, Electrical Workers, Stagehands and Iron Workers—to take over work previously done by the Carpenters and Teamsters. Teamsters official William Hamilton confirmed that other crafts are paid less and lashed out against them, saying, “The building trades eat their young. They beat the hell out of each other every day.”

When rumors emerged that Carpenters would stage mass picketing and ring the convention center, Carpenters head Ed Coryell said it was not true.

Pennsylvania hospital workers carry out one-day strike

Over 150 workers at the Geisinger Lewistown Hospital in Lewistown, Pennsylvania staged a one-day strike May 6 to protest management’s demand for wage and pension cuts and a lower wage tier for new hires. The cuts target members of the Service Employees International Union, who make about \$13 an hour, compared to the hospital’s CEO Glenn Steele, who grabbed a 125 percent raise in 2012 and currently makes over \$5 million a year.

The two sides have been negotiating since January. At the end of April workers voted to reject the hospitals “last, best, and final offer.”

“Nobody wants to go on strike,” Teresa Williams, a sterile processing tech, told Fox43. “But sometimes you have to stand up for what’s right. Geisinger makes millions off the work we do, but is trying to take away benefits and lower job standards. We can’t sit back and let that happen.”

Canada

Edmonton health care workers strike

Health care aides at Supports for Artspace Independent Living (SAIL) in Edmonton, Alberta, went on strike last Wednesday after negotiators for SAIL rejected two proposals by the union representing the workers, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE).

The 30 workers affected, who are employed at a housing co-op in Edmonton providing personal care for clients, are all female and largely first generation immigrants. Their wages lag as much as 20 percent below those of other health care workers in Alberta, making them among the lowest paid health care workers in the industry. They are fighting to bring their wages and benefits to a level where they can support themselves and their families.

SAIL is funded by the provincial government through the Alberta Health Services (AHS) at rates on par with other caregivers in the province, but the organization claims they cannot afford what workers are asking.



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