

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 May 2014

Latin America

Brazilian transportation workers strike to protest inadequate wage raise

Bus drivers in Sao Paulo struck on May 20 in opposition to their union's agreement to a raise they considered insufficient. The drivers blocked 14 bus terminals and tied up traffic along several key streets.

The drivers' union denounced the strike, saying that the 10 percent raise was twice the amount offered by the companies and had been approved in a general assembly. The union's original demand had been for 30 percent.

The strike followed previous work stoppages in the last few weeks by Rio de Janeiro bus drivers, who protested the agreement reached by their union, paralyzing that city for three days.

The striking Sao Paulo drivers returned to work after agreeing to meet the next day at the Labor Ministry in tripartite meetings, though sporadic stoppages continued to occur around the city. Meanwhile, bus drivers in nine cities on Sao Paulo's periphery, which were not covered by the accord, struck on May 22 to demand raises.

Costa Rican teachers continue strike, protests over delayed salary payments

Teachers in Costa Rica remain on strike over delays in their salary payments. About 7,000 educators walked out and marched in protest May 5 after meetings between their unions and the Education Ministry (MEP) failed.

The MEP has said that it has resolved the problems, which it claims were caused by the change to a new database, and that the government will pay 70 percent of the delayed salaries if the teachers fill out a form at MEP regional branches.

Teachers' union officials, calling the MEP's response to the issue "palliative care," have called for the strike to continue until May 27, when they will evaluate payment reports and decide on future actions.

Teachers marched to the Finance Ministry May 23 and blocked roads to demand full payment of the back pay. Some teachers carried cilantro branches in protest against a remark by incoming president Luis Guillermo Solis. Solis, who had postured as a supporter of the teachers during his electoral campaign, changed his tune last week and urged the teachers to go back to work, saying "Cilantro is good, but not in excess."

Mexican transport drivers strike over labor law violations

Intercity transport drivers in the Mexican port city of Veracruz struck on May 23 over a number of demands regarding repeated violations of labor law by the CAXA bus company. The workers, members of the Independent Drivers Syndicate (SINCHO-CROC), also demand the firing of the director, Virginia Moreno.

Union reps had presented CAXA with a petition, which the firm refused. A May 21 meeting at the State Labor, Social Security and Productivity Office broke down, leading to the strike call.

Among the violations cited by union head Lauro Humberto Martinez are the refusal to modify hours and strenuous workdays that provoke tiredness among the drivers, resulting in accidents, some of which have been fatal.

CAXA flouts the collective contract on wages as well. Martinez told Milenio, "We have had wage packets of 18 pesos [US\$1.40] when the collective contract says that we earn 376 pesos [US\$29] for a workday."

Dominican informal cab drivers protest police crackdown

On the morning of May 20, drivers of informal taxis, called “conchos,” snarled traffic by blocking streets in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic’s capital. The action was a protest against the recent arrests of 30 concho drivers and the impounding of their vehicles by the transit police.

Gen. Juan Geronimo Brown, chief of the transit police, told reporters that the clampdown would not let up. “We’re being very firm. We won’t let this continue, and we won’t let these people take over the streets.”

Conchos are cheaper than regular taxis and do not follow Law 241, which regulates taxi routes and the number of allowable passengers. Thus, they are popular with cash-strapped riders and unpopular with official taxi companies and transit police.

The United States

Ohio workers oppose removal of successor clause

Workers at Clifton Steel Company in Maple Heights, Ohio have been on strike since April 24, protesting an attempt by management to remove a successor clause in the contract that requires any future buyer to fund their health and pension fund agreements. Clifton Steel wants to alter the clause to permit a new owner of the company to negotiate benefits that may not include the Teamsters health and pension funds.

Seth Briskin, labor counsel for Clifton Steel, told the Plain Dealer, “Those two plans, especially the pension plan, are so underwater and uncompetitive, that when put up against a private plan or a 401(k) plan, that no one in their right mind is going to negotiate for the pension plan.”

Teamsters Local 507, which represents 30 workers has since indicated that strikers want to return to work, but management has refused to accept them, and is accusing the company of now locking out workers. No talks are currently scheduled and an unfair labor practice charge by the Teamsters with the National Labor Relations Board is pending.

Workers picket at Baltimore-Washington airport

Two separate groups of workers at Baltimore-Washington International Airport (BWI) held picket-line protests May 22. About 50 workers at Hudson news struck for one day to protest contract concessions, while concession workers at

HMSHost are seeking to unionize.

Hudson News, a subsidiary of the duty-free travel retailer Defry AG, wants to reduce its contributions to pensions and health care while offering a miserly 15 cent wage increase. Workers also complained strongly about short staffing. One told the *Baltimore Brew*, “If you get a bathroom break, you’re lucky. We’ve had people who have had accidents because of this. We’re short-handed. There’s no one to relieve you.”

HMSHost is an employment service that supplies workers to airport restaurants such as Starbucks, LaToya and Phillips Seafood.

Canada

Rotating strikes by teachers in British Columbia

Last Monday, the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) began a campaign of rotating strike action in response to what it says is the government’s unwillingness to negotiate fairly for a new contract.

The job action will affect the entire province this week with rolling one-day strikes affecting every school. This follows “stage one” of a job action, which was a limited work-to-rule protocol leading up to the strike. Teachers are seeking a 10.75 percent wage increase over four years and reductions in class sizes, while the employer is offering only 7.25 percent over six years with no change in class size, down from its demand for a 10-year deal.

The BC Employers’ Association (BCEA) has said it will dock five percent of teachers’ salaries starting this week to make up for lost work hours, which will increase to a 10 percent cut until a new deal is reached. This, despite the fact that the BCEA has imposed a limited lockout on teachers, restricting their hours at work.

With over 27,000 members working in schools in BC, the Canadian Union of Public Employees has said that its members would not cross picket lines, which could ultimately assure the closure of schools. Negotiations are continuing through the week but neither side appears hopeful of reaching a settlement soon.



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