

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 July 2014

Latin America

Colombian coal mine mechanics down tools over salary demand

Mechanics employed by Dimantec, a contract service for Colombia's main coal producers, began an indefinite strike July 9 to demand better wages. Some 3,500 workers are employed by Dimantec, which provides maintenance personnel for coal giants Cerrejón and Drummond.

In addition to their demands for a 12 percent raise, the workers are calling for improvements in health, education and housing. The workers are represented by the SINTRAIME mechanical, metallurgical and rail workers union.

SINTRAIME president Félix Herrera told reporters that despite the strike, the union is "disposed to dialogue" with the enterprise.

Colombian medical workers strike for payment of overdue salaries

Nurses and specialists at the San Jerónimo de Montería Hospital in Colombia's Córdoba department struck July 9 over the delay in payments of their salaries. General service and contract pharmaceutical employees also joined in the action.

The workers also expressed fear in the face of the threat of massive firings following the change of administration at the hospital. One striking nurse told *El Espectador*, "They are telling us that the policy changed already and that we're going to work until July 31."

As the daily put it, the crisis at the hospital "has a political tinge." The comptroller's office suspended administrator Dr. Nelson Morales six months ago over various irregularities and the governor, Alejandro Lyons, replaced him with Dr. Edwin Preciado. Morales was recently reinstated and, according to him, the administrative staff was decimated during Preciado's tenure.

Preciado claims that he encountered a chaotic situation that "had no precedent" in the hospital's history. In particular, he denounced the presence of four contract attorneys, each making 7.5 million pesos (US\$3,070) a month, when there were already legal staff at the hospital.

Morales countered that the situation is "worrisome," that losses have reached 5,000 million pesos (US\$2.7 million) in the last five months, and that the hospital has failed to pay 880 million pesos (US\$473,000) in monthly salaries since January.

Chilean pharmacy workers enter third week of strike

On June 25, employees of the Cruz Verde pharmacy firm in Chile went

on strike nationally over a number of outstanding issues. In some cities, like Santiago and Concepción, protesting workers beat *bombós* (traditional drums), chanted and carried signs with their demands.

Workers are demanding a base monthly salary of 350,000 pesos (US\$632) for salespersons and 280,000 pesos (US\$505) for warehouse workers. Cruz Verde is offering 253,000 (US\$457) and 225,000 pesos (US\$406) respectively.

Most Cruz Verde workers have not received a raise in four years. The striking workers also denounced working conditions, the hiring of scabs, and management's refusal to meet to discuss the issues. The union has submitted a complaint to the Labor Ministry against the firm for illegal hiring practices during a legal strike.

24-hour strike by Argentine bank workers over firings, injuries, "profit tax"

Workers in Argentina's banking industry held a nationwide strike July 7 to protest recent actions directed against them by their employers and the government. In some regions, like the central province of Neuquén, the workers' union, the Banking Association, claimed up to 95 percent participation, resulting in long lines at ATMs.

The striking workers held a protest in front of the headquarters of the Banco Provincia de Neuquén in the province's eponymous capital, as they did in other cities. In some cities, like Caleta Olivia in the northeastern Santa Cruz province, participation was less consistent.

Among the actions the bank employees protested were the firing of 36 employees at the Caja Popular de Tucumán (Tucumán Credit Union), the injuries to 22 employees protesting privatization, and the imposition of a "profit tax" (impuesto de ganancia) against workers deemed highly paid.

Association officials said that they would continue protests if their demands are not met.

Argentine public transport drivers end strike to protest late payment of wages

Public transportation drivers for the 3 de Mayo bus service in Bariloche, Argentina returned to work July 10, their fourth day on strike. The drivers had walked off the job over the nonpayment of overdue wages. 3 de Mayo accounts for 55 percent of bus service in the city.

Mayor Maria Eugenia Martini held meetings with officials of the Transport Union (UTA) as well as with a mediator appointed by a civil judge to resolve the issue. At the July 10 meeting, she showed the UTA reps a deposit slip from the treasury. The UTA called workers back to the job.

Short strike by Antiguan port workers over ship allowances, shift changes

Mechanics, dock masters, tally clerks, longshoremen and other workers at St. John's, Antigua staged a sit-in July 7 to demand the payment of ship allowances. The stoppage began at 6 am, but was over by 11 am following a meeting between the Antigua Workers Union shop steward and two workers on one side and the port manager and human resource manager on the other.

The bone of contention consisted of efforts by management to change the shift structure. Currently there are three shifts: 7 am to 4 pm, 9 am to 6 pm and the "anytime necessary" shift, which begins at 1 am to 10 am. Management wants to eliminate the 9 am shift.

The workers accuse management of wanting to get rid of overtime. They have expressed willingness to break the contract and end the shift, but only if they get paid overtime and a ship allowance. They were also protesting against having received only half of the payment.

News coverage did not elaborate on the result of the talks and the call back to work.

The United States

Pennsylvania water workers walk out

Workers at the Pennsylvania American Water Company in Pittsburgh set up picket lines June 18 after management changed the terms of their working agreement. The contract, covering 144 members of the UWUA Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) Local 537, expired three years ago and last June 9 the company implemented terms of its "last, best, and final offer."

That proposal calls for the use of outside contractors to perform work previously done by union members. The union has maintained that the current walkout is actually a lockout due to the fact the company has illegally implemented contract terms and has complaints on file with the National Labor Relations Board.

Since the walkout, there have been 14 cases of fire hydrants being opened up. The company called it a "remarkable coincidence that the highest volume of hydrant tampering we've ever seen has occurred since those employees left their jobs on June 18." But Local 537 president Kevin Booth countered, "I can tell you flat out that there are no utility workers opening fire hydrants. The company is trying to make the utility workers look bad, like we're sabotaging service."

Pennsylvania American Water Company is owned by parent company American Water, which operates municipal water systems in 30 U.S. states and Ontario, Canada.

Pennsylvania school bus drivers decertify union

School bus drivers in Monroeville, Pennsylvania voted by 87 percent on June 27 to decertify the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) as their bargaining representative. Of the 105 workers, 102 signed a petition submitted to the National Labor Relations Board requesting a secret ballot to determine representation.

It was the fourth petition attempt by workers. Previously, the ATU had strove to block elections. The National Right to Work Foundation supplied lawyers and aid in the election, but given the fact that 102 out of

the 105 bus drivers signed the petition, there can be little doubt that the action was motivated by deep dissatisfaction by workers with the union bureaucracy.

In July of 2013, Student Transportation of America, Inc. was contracted to run bus services at the Gateway School District outside of Pittsburgh. The decertification takes place after eight months of failed negotiations with the company. The workers will now negotiate directly with Student Transportation.

Canada

Toronto area transit workers locked out

Transit workers in the City of Guelph, Ontario, west of Toronto, were locked out on Monday of this week after voting overwhelmingly to reject the city's final offer on Friday.

City bus service is halted and no talks are currently scheduled for contract negotiations that had been ongoing since last October between the city and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), representing more than 200 transit workers, who have been without a contract since last June.

The union says that workers rejected the city's offer, which contained wage increases below the cost of living, pointing out that the main issue is working conditions and being treated with respect. At the same time, an ATU spokesperson said that it was not interested in a service disruption and only held the recent strike vote as a last resort.

Bombardier workers in northern Ontario set to strike

Over 1,000 workers at the Thunder Bay plant of Bombardier Transportation are set to go on strike this week if last minute talks don't lead to an agreement between the company and Unifor, the union representing the workers.

The union says that Bombardier is demanding substantial concessions in a new contract in the areas of wages, benefits and pensions. Workers have been without a contract since the end of May and no talks are currently scheduled.

Bombardier, the Canadian transportation giant based in Montreal, has the contract to build new streetcars and subway cars for the Toronto Transit Commission.



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