

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 July 2014

Latin America

Short strikes by Argentine customs agents to demand raises

Customs house workers in Argentina held short strikes July 24 and 25 over salary demands. The workers are members of the Supara customs workers union. The strike slowed activity at the ports of Bahía Blanca and Necochea. If they do not get an agreement, Supara has called for carrying out similar actions this Thursday and Friday.

The customs workers' strike follows a walkout by agroexport inspectors the week before (see July 23 Workers Struggles), slowing the loading of grains and grain byproducts. The actions take place "in the context of an elevated inflation rate in the South American country, that according to private analysts is around 30 percent annually and is undermining the purchasing power of Argentine salaries," according to notimerica.com.

Paraguayan radiologists strike over management's unfulfilled promises

Radiology workers in Paraguay's Social Security Institute (IPS) began a strike July 23 to demand the compliance of the board of directors with promised measures.

Demonstrators intermittently blocked the street in front of the IPS headquarters in Asunción, and there was a mobilization inside the Central Hospital. Support actions took place in the nation's interior.

Among the unfulfilled commitments are recognition of the status of licensed professionals who thus would be eligible for promotion, repair and updating of X-ray equipment and adequate supplies like plates and CDs. Another issue is the shortage of qualified personnel to meet the high demand—about 200 X-rays a day—when the number of radiologists is not even 10. Moreover, there is insufficient protective equipment.

Sit-in by striking Peruvian nurses

Hundreds of nurses employed by Peru's social security system, Essalud, staged a sit-in at the nation's principal hospital in Lima on July 22. Bearing pennants, balloons and drums, the nurses sat in at the Edgardo Rebagliati Hospital to demand improvements in salaries and labor conditions.

The nurses are in their seventh week of a national strike. They have had 25 meetings with Essalud directors without "a glint of any accord," as one nurse told Canal N reporters.

The nurses have sustained critical services like intensive care and

emergencies throughout the length of the strike. Their demands include being on the same salary scale as chemists and odontologists, the contracting of 1,500 nurses to fill vacancies and not overwork them, sufficient supplies and medications, and improvements in emergency service conditions.

Ecuadorian soccer players strike over back pay, working conditions

Players in the Soccer Association of Ecuador (AFE) went on strike July 21 to press a list of 13 demands, or points, the most critical concerning the payment of overdue salaries. One point is that the clubs in the Ecuadorian Soccer Federation (FEF) change the deadline for making payments from 90 to 60 days and that they sign a document committing to the deadline.

In some clubs, players have been owed up to 11 months in back wages.

Other demands included transparency regarding payrolls and budgets; restructuring of the dispute and resolution process; standardization of contracts, worked out with union participation; and inclusion of vacation, social security and other benefits in the contracts.

Although the parties claimed that some progress had been made, a four-hour meeting on July 23 between the AFE and the FEF failed to restart championship games that were put on hold when the strike broke out. By July 24, the strike was suspended with the signing of an agreement at FEF headquarters.

Two-day strike by Panamanian teachers to demand raise

Teachers at the Padre Segundo Familiar Cano de Monagrillo secondary school in Chitré, Herrera state, Panama, called a 48-hour extendable strike beginning July 28 to demand a raise following the presentation of a plan of improvements at the school.

A total of 120 teachers at the school have received the raise, but 24 still have not been paid since May. Teachers' spokespersons claim that the school has not submitted the required documentation to the Human Resources Ministry. If it is necessary, the teachers say they will implement other measures if they do not get certification that they are going to receive the raise.

Panamanian canal expansion workers strike over maltreatment, pay

Workers on the Panama Canal amplification project struck on July 21 to demand the rehiring of 21 fired co-workers, dismissal of some supervisors and an 11 percent raise. About 1,500 workers are involved in this phase of the project.

The workers accuse the supervisors, who are contracted by a consortium of Spanish, Mexican and Costa Rican firms and come from outside Panama, of mistreating and in some case arbitrarily firing workers.

Abelardo Herrera, general secretary of the National Construction Industry Workers Union, told reporters, “We are not against foreigners, but we are not going to permit them to come and mistreat us. They should respect the Panamanian workers because the Canal is Panamanian and respect should be mutual.” Herrera claimed, “The measure will be maintained until all the points are resolved. The morning and afternoon shifts remain 100 percent paralyzed. Nobody is moving inside the project.”

However, on July 24, after several meetings, the Labor Ministry announced that the union had called off the strike. According to *prensa.com*, “While these issues have not been resolved, the ministry said talks would resume this weekend.”

Guatemalan bus drivers march against gang extortion, violence

Drivers of intercity buses, joined by bus owners, marched in Guatemala City July 24 to demand greater security against gangs. The gang members board the buses, demand extortion payments and commit violence—including murder—against drivers who will not or cannot pay them. About 3,000 protesters, carrying signs reading “No more extortion or murders of drivers and assistants,” participated in the march.

Payments by bus companies to gangs run to about 180 million quetzals (\$US23.1 million) per year.

St. Lucia workers protest dismissals at oil terminal

Some 60 workers at the Buckeye St. Lucia Terminal Limited in Castries, St. Lucia, arrived at work July 24 to find out that they had been terminated as part of the oil company’s restructuring. Some of the workers staged protest actions, and police were called in to “restore and maintain order,” according to a *Jamaica Observer* report. No arrests or injuries were reported.

A Buckeye press release said that “as part of Buckeye St. Lucia Terminal Limited’s ongoing effort to complete the transition to Buckeye’s business and operating culture, the company is undergoing a re-organisation and restructuring. As such, certain positions at the terminal will be modified, expanded, or eliminated.”

As the *Observer* noted, “Buckeye St. Lucia Terminal Ltd, is one of several business operations to have either closed or downsized their operations as a result of the problems in the St. Lucia economy.”

The United States

New Mexico nurses’ union withdraws strike notice as contract expires

The union representing nurses and technical staff at Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, will withdraw its strike notice July 28, as the contract covering some 400 workers will expire on July 31. District 1199 NM also recommended that workers reject management’s latest offer in a strike vote over the weekend.

The union claimed its decision to cancel the strike notice was based on hope that new negotiations might settle the contract. But management announced last week that it would offer \$6,300 per week for replacement nurses, and starting Monday, the hospital would begin paying for hotel and flight expenses. All these costs, according to management, would be deducted from the current contract proposal.

A major stumbling block has been staffing levels. Current staffing levels have dropped from the 50th percentile to the 40th percentile, meaning that 60 percent of hospitals of similar size to Christus maintain a greater level of staffing for patient care.

The previous contract set up a union-management staffing committee but, according to the union, recommendations were not implemented. In the new agreement, management has proposed contract language that would bar the union from filing complaints with the National Labor Relations Board, state or federal courts about staffing levels.

New Jersey health care workers rally as contract approaches expiration

Health care workers at the Bayonne Medical Center (BMC) in Bayonne, New Jersey, rallied July 21 to press their demands for safe staffing levels and pensions. The contract covering 860 nurses, pharmacists and other workers represented by the Health Professionals and Allied Employees Local 5185 will expire July 31, but union leaders say a walkout is not on the table at this point and want to continue bargaining with management. CarePoint has only said, “At this time, no lock out has been announced or planned.”

Nurses are worried that CarePoint Health, which owns BMC, wants to be able to shift nurses between that facility and two other facilities under its control—Christ Hospital and Hoboken University Medical Center. CarePoint management insists that this proposal is only voluntary.

Canada

IKEA cited for union-busting tactics in British Colombia

Last week, the British Columbia Labour Relations Board (LRB) issued a ruling against furniture giant IKEA for its efforts to hire back workers who have been on strike for over a year at its Richmond outlet.

The LRB ordered that IKEA cease bargaining directly with striking workers, bypassing the Teamsters Union as exclusive bargaining agent. Through a web site, IKEA had been offering strikers a C\$2.50-an-hour incentive to abandon the strike and return to work, a rate that the union points out is well above what they were offering at the bargaining table.

The union has expelled 35 workers whom IKEA hired back through their campaign, and a decision on an application by the Teamsters to disallow their employment will be issued by October. IKEA has indicated that it will not return to negotiations until those issues are decided.



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