

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 August 2014

Latin America

Twenty-four-hour strike by Uruguayan trash collectors

Trash pickups in Montevideo, Uruguay were paralyzed for 24 hours—from 1 p.m., August 20 to 1 p.m., August 21—when municipal trash collection and maintenance workers struck over conditions at rubbish drop-off sites. The Montevideo Municipal Employees and Workers Association (ADEOM) called the limited action over “breaches” committed by the Municipal Administration of Montevideo (IMM).

Conditions at one site were described by ADEOM secretary General Anibal Varela: “We have a truck wash that is in rather disastrous condition. We have 15 or 20 compañeros working there. They have to walk 1,700 meters (1860 yards) to go shower and do their necessities... The agreements with the administration were not completed.”

The strike had originally started only among the maintenance workers, but when IMM put out a call for strikebreakers, the trash collection and other sectors stopped work.

Bolivian health workers strike for back pay, medicine, supplies

Municipal health workers in the Bolivian town of La Guardia, located in the nation’s eastern Santa Cruz province, began a 72-hour strike on August 19. The workers walked out to demand the payment of overdue wages and the provision of medicines and supplies, including food for patients.

The municipal government responded by paying two months of overdue salaries on August 20. However, the strike continued since the other demands were not met. The workers’ union had submitted to the media a list of 50 medications lacking in the departmental Universal Health Insurance agency.

Medical workers in the departmental capital La Cruz de la Sierra struck in support of the La Guardia workers.

Peruvian port workers strike for unpaid wages

Workers at the Port Terminal of Chimbote on Peru’s coast began a strike August 21 to protest the nonpayment of their wages. José Jara Paredes, secretary general of the Chimbote Dockworkers Syndicate, told reporters that at least 33 dockworkers had not been paid for two months, and that workers had not received benefits.

Jara Paredes added that if the port authorities do not accede to the strikers’ demands, the workers would radicalize their measures.

Venezuelan hospital workers strike over unpaid wages and lack of supplies

On August 20, workers at the Antonio Patricio de Alcalá University Hospital in Cumaná, capital of the Venezuelan state of Sucre, began an indefinite strike. Work in laboratories, as well as in areas of dentistry, general consultations and specialties, came to a standstill—with the exception of emergencies—as the workers demanded payment of overdue salaries, provision of supplies and maintenance of equipment.

A report by el-nacional.com detailed some of the problems in the health system: “The emergency room of Hulapa is in a state of collapse. It has the capacity for 15 daily patients, but between 60 and 70 patients come. In surgery there is anesthesia; there is no anesthesiologist. For lack of supplies, they have stopped giving hormone tests and tests for HIV.” A dental worker complained of lack of mirrors, amalgams and resins, while a bioanalyst mentioned that labs do not have air conditioning, equipment, tables and chairs.

Strike by Salvadoran bus drivers over gang murder of operator

At least 30 minibuses on Route 41-A between downtown San Salvador and the San José 2 de Soyapango district to the northeast were idled by an indefinite strike that began August 18. Operators for another route, 53-D between Nahuizalco and Sonsonate, joined the action.

The strike was a protest against the killing on the previous night of 63-year-old Manuel Antonio Guardado, a member of a bus cooperative, as well as against extortion, threats and murders committed by gangs. Police say they have never received a formal complaint against the extortions.

According to police reports, several gang members opened fire on Guardado as he was driving his bus home. Commuters complain that gang members often board the buses and demand money from the drivers. “In other cases they demand that passengers strip completely to see if they are tattooed,” according to elmundo.com.sv.

One-hour strike by Mexican contract professors over nonpayment of wages

Contract professors at the University of Guadalajara’s University Center of Art, Architecture and Design stopped work for one hour on August 19 to protest the nonpayment of their wages for the first half of the month. In some cases the professors, who are paid by the hour, received 10 percent of their pay; others received nothing.

The professors are contracted by semester, and the administration has told them that if the number of students signing up for a class were less than 17, the class would be dropped. In some cases, a student has no other

options if his or her class doesn't get the requisite minimum sign-up. Alberto Salvador Padilla Sánchez, a delegate for the arts division, characterized the administration's attitude toward the professors as "contempt."

Padilla Sánchez told reporters that, depending on the university's response, the professors would decide "if we sharpen the actions or if we continue with our labors. The aspiration of all of us is to continue working, but we need to get this problem taken care of first."

Retrenched Barbadian transport workers protest, demand severance pay

On August 18, about two-dozen angry retrenched workers arrived at the Transport Board in Weymouth, St. Michael, Barbados to demand severance pay. The workers were among over 100 displaced over five months ago and have yet to receive any compensation.

The Barbados Workers Union has done little to press the workers' case, so some of them took matters into their own hands, marching onto the Transport Board compound and vociferously demanding their money. Workers told reporters of utility shutoffs, warnings from banks and hungry children.

Three management personnel addressed the workers for over two hours, as workers shouted that the pay was long overdue. Eventually they dispersed with a promise by general manager Sandra Forde—who claimed that the board was "not in possession of the total funds"—that some of the pay would be available on August 29.

The United States

California transit strike ends with workers' demands unfulfilled

Transit workers in Bakersfield, California returned to work August 19, ending a five-week strike by drivers and bus mechanics. Teamsters Local 517 Secretary-Treasurer Chester Suniga claimed he was satisfied that while the union had not gained its main demands, the mere airing of the issues was sufficient. "I believe these were addressed by the [Bakersfield] City Council, and that was also a big part of getting this contract."

Suniga attempted to justify the concessions to management by saying, "The public has always been in our mind" and that the new agreement "proves that our drivers and our maintenance people are not greedy."

Workers were adamantly opposed to a two-tier system that exploits part-time workers who essentially perform at full-time capacity while receiving inferior pay. Nothing was done to alter this system in the new agreement.

Workers were also demanding 4 percent wage increases in each year of a new three-year agreement. But the new contract only provides yearly increases of 3 percent, 2.5 percent and 2 percent.

The Golden Empire Transit District, which manages Bakersfield's transit system, had held the position that it could not afford wage increases over 2 percent. When challenged about the wage increases in years one and two of 3 and 2.5 percent respectively, management declared they may have to implement budget cuts in the coming year to cover the raises.

Ohio social workers strike for higher wages

Social workers for Butler County Children Services in Ohio went on strike August 19 after mediated talks over the weekend failed to meet workers' demand for higher pay. The walkout represents the first time government workers in Butler County have ever walked off their jobs.

According to the Butler County Children Services Independent Union, management has called other nonstriking government workers into individual meetings and warned them if they join picket lines of striking workers during breaks or before or after work, they will be considered "on strike" and locked out of their jobs.

Union attorney Jessup Gage commented to the press, "If those allegations are accurate, I think that would be an illegal infringement on their First Amendment right to free speech. It's unclear if these employees would be locked out if they used their personal time to speak up in support of their fellow union members, but if so, that would also be illegal because I don't believe lockout is permitted in public sector bargaining."

Canada

Firefighters storm Montreal City Hall

Hundreds of firefighters and other city workers stormed Montreal City Hall in protest last Monday on the first day of hearings for Bill 3, proposed provincial legislation that would cut workers' pensions and other benefits.

Firefighters and some other municipal workers are barred from striking due to essential-service laws, which has led to ongoing protests across Quebec against the bill and a mass early retirement of firefighters in June. Protests reached a head last week when workers flooded into City Hall throwing paper and disrupting proceedings, to the outrage of city officials.

Union leaders have blamed city corruption for what the government calculates as a nearly \$4 billion shortfall in funding, which they say requires cuts to wage and benefits and the "reform" of workers' pensions. The protest campaign was recently joined by a coalition of retired workers in response to proposed changes that could cut up to 20 percent from union pensions by eliminating indexing.



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