

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 September 2014

Latin America

Protest strike by Argentine bus drivers over murdered colleague

Following the shooting death September 4 of a coworker by a would-be robber, bus drivers in Almirante Brown, the westernmost department in Argentina's Chaco province, refused to drive two routes, lines 514 and 160, for 24 hours.

That morning at about 5:00, 45-year-old René Ruiz was getting out of his parked car when the assailant shot him and fled.

The striking drivers protested in front of the Almirante Brown Operations and Monitoring Center, demanding greater security for drivers and other employees. One demand of the employer, Expreso Arseno, was to let the workers park on the terminal premises, since Ruiz was killed at a private parking lot. A protesting driver told *Info Región*, "The workers have to park their cars in a private lot because the enterprise doesn't provide us a place."

Uruguayan LNG union lifts strike over workers' suspensions

A strike begun at Megal, a Uruguayan distributor of liquefied natural gas—*supergás* in Spanish—was called off September 5 by the workers' union, the Single LNG Workers Syndicate (SUTS). SUTS had called the action to demand the reinstatement of nine workers, six of them union delegates, who were suspended by the company on August 29.

According to a SUTS spokesperson, "The business gave the order to fill tanks that were outdated or in bad condition. The workers refused and were verbally threatened with suspension." The union maintains that the workers were in assembly and were sanctioned for that, but Megal claims that they closed a door to the plant, preventing the departure of a distributor.

At a meeting requested by SUTS with the Directorate of Labor (Dinatra), Megal stonewalled and said it would maintain the suspensions, as well as a later firing of a subcontracted employee.

This is the winter season in South America, and many Uruguayans depend on propane and natural gas for heating and cooking. Dinatra floated the possibility of declaring the LNG essential, meaning sanctions could be applied to the union. After a union assembly September 4, SUTS called off the strike. Megal, however, has said that it still holds by the suspensions, which lasted five days.

Indefinite strike by Colombian hospital workers over firings, unpaid salaries, supply shortages

At 12:30 p.m. on September 4, workers at the San Jerónimo de Montería public hospital in the Colombian department of Córdoba went on indefinite strike following an assembly vote earlier that day.

The workers agreed to continue attending to patients already in the hospital, but suspended external consultations as well as selective and scheduled surgeries. Doctors remained at their worksites in case of emergencies, but otherwise did not work.

The strike is a protest against what they call the "labor massacre" orchestrated by hospital management, represented by massive firings, delays in the payment of up to five months' wages, and shortages or the lack of supplies needed to give optimal attention to the needs of patients. Hospital management signed an agreement in the presence of the governor on August 29, but has done nothing to fulfill its promises since.

A representative of the striking workers, Dr. Jorge Odosgoitia, emphasized, "What interests us as a central point is that this health care center exist as a true hospital and not as less than a municipal health center," since it serves surrounding areas in addition to Montería. *El Heraldo* reports, "As well as there not being these days imagenology studios, x-ray intensifiers, orthopedic surgeries, microscopes for high complexity surgeries and emergency supplies, the hospital does not have pathologists either."

Venezuelan steel workers union, government sign contract

The Venezuelan minister of industry, José David Cabello, announced the signing of a collective contract with the Sidor Workers Trade Union (Sidor) September 4. This is the first contract signed between the parties since 2010 and follows two years of confrontations, including shootings and arrests of protesting workers by National Guard troops in August.

The Sidor plant, located in Guayana City, is state-run and the largest steel corporation in Venezuela.

Among the contract provisions are an increase of 170 bolivars (US\$27) in the daily wage to be paid in installments, retroactive pay of 200,000 bolivars (US\$31,700) for the length of time spent negotiating the contract, a retirement plan and an investment plan to increase production.

St. Lucian firefighters strike over longstanding grievances

Firefighters on the island of St. Lucia voted September 1 to strike in order to force authorities to address their grievances, among them blatant discrimination, lack of transparency, inconsistency and abuse of power by senior officers. The firefighters are members of the St. Lucia Fire Service Association (SLFSA).

The firefighters have held a number of protest actions, including petitions, demonstrations, sickouts and short strikes to pressure authorities to implement a list of recommendations drawn from the findings of a

Commission of Inquiry (COI), but to no avail. The SLFSA sought and received verbal support from the Civil Service Association (CSA), but the CSA did not walk out.

On September 5, National Security Minister Victor La Corbiniere began holding talks with SLFSA officials.

Trinidadian oil workers protest for raise in minimum wage

Oilfield Workers' Trade Union (OWTU) members picketed the office of Labour Minister Errol McLeod in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, on September 5 to press a list of demands, including the raising of the minimum wage to TT\$20 (US\$3.16) an hour. The current minimum wage in Trinidad and Tobago, dating back to January 2011, is TT\$12.50 (US\$1.98).

The picketers chanted, "Shake the tree and let McLeod fall." McLeod, a former trade unionist, has said that the PP government "will maintain a sensible course of action" and not employ "reckless tactics" when dealing with the issue.

The protesters also called on Minister of Finance and the Economy Larry Howai to factor in a minimum wage hike in his 2014-2015 budget presentation scheduled for September 8.

The wage issue is one of several that have festered for years. In 2010, the People's Partnership (PP), a coalition of five parties, with the support of the trade unions, wrested power from the People's National Movement government. With the signing of the Fyzabad Accord, it promised to make at least 15 changes in labor law and to enhance workers' rights in addition to raising wages. One of the unfulfilled promises is the removal of severe limitations on the right to strike.

Visually impaired Trinidadian workers occupy workplace to demand unpaid wages

About 30 visually impaired workers began an occupation at the Blind Welfare Association office in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, on August 28. The workers had not been paid since August 8, and they said they would maintain the sit-in until they received their wages. The workers were still in the office the first week of September.

The workers also demanded the firing of Kenneth Suratt, chief executive officer of the association.

The branch secretary of the All Trinidad General Workers' Trade Union, Joseph Vautor-Laplaceliere, told the *Trinidad Express* that the association had told the workers that it did not have the funds to pay them. Furthermore, the association had not been deducting funds for the National Insurance, bank loans and other payments for the last three months, resulting in possible late payment penalties, repossessions and inability to pay for mortgages and school supplies for their children.

The union, which had been liaising with the Ministry of the People and Social Development, had been told that the prime minister had signed off on "whatever supplementary budget that we have requested," according to Vautor-Laplaceliere.

However, the workers were told that the monies would not be forthcoming until the next week, prompting them to remain at their places. On September 4, Suratt received a check from the Ministry of the People and Social Development to cover wages, and the workers were paid the next day, ending the occupation.

The United States

Illinois workers strike for higher wages

Some 360 workers at the Juno Lighting Group plant in Des Plaines, Illinois, went on strike September 3 after rejecting a mediated contract three days earlier. According to workers, management's meager wage offer was eradicated by demanding workers to shoulder a greater percentage of health care premiums.

The largely Spanish-speaking workforce make as little as \$9 to \$11 an hour. "Our cause here is for higher wages," a worker told the *Daily Herald Business Ledger*. "We want some respect, some dignity. They're giving us a raise that is not enough for the cost of living. It's a misery what they're trying to offer us as a raise."

The company has responded to the strike by the Service Employees International Union against Juno Lighting by bringing in temporary replacement workers. Juno Lighting is an affiliate of Schneider Electric and manufactures lighting fixtures.

Canada

Ottawa area home-care workers on strike

One hundred forty personal support workers (PSWs), nurses and other staff employed by ParaMed Home Health Care in Renfrew County, west of Ottawa, went on strike last week after working without a contract since January 2013.

The strikers are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), whose leaders have said that they were forced to take action after two years with a wage freeze and opposition from ParaMed on a number of other issues. The starting wage for a PSW is \$12.88 an hour, and they are obliged to use their own vehicles to carry out their care rounds for patients in their homes which can be several towns apart.

There are media reports that a local community care center has plans to bring in replacement workers from other home care services to care for up to 1,200 ParaMed clients. The strikers have set up picket lines in centers from Ottawa to Pembroke and beyond.



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