

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 September 2014

Three-week strike by Peruvian mineworkers over wage demands

Workers at the Shougang Hierro Peru iron mine in the nation's Ica region returned to their jobs on September 8 after three weeks on strike. The workers walked out August 18 to demand a raise of 9 soles (US\$3.15) per day; the company offered a minuscule 4 soles (US\$1.40).

The Shougang Hierro mineworkers union consists of 1,088 members. On August 27, several hundred workers marched on the Palace of Justice to demand the raise. Shougang declared "force majeure," which removes liability for unfilled orders due to unforeseen circumstances.

The Labor Ministry responded by intervening and imposing a daily raise of 4.7 soles (US\$1.65), barely above management's original offer, and ordering the mineworkers back to the job. The union immediately called off the strike.

Mineworker strikes and protests have broken out in other parts of Peru in the last few months. At the Doe Run lead, copper and zinc complex in La Oroya, workers have held intermittent strikes and protests since June.

On September 10, 1,200 workers at the Austria Duvaz mine near Huancayo ended a weeklong strike after their union announced a negotiated raise for an unspecified amount.

And in the Yauli district, 500 residents blocked the Central Highway to protest the Chinalco aluminum and copper mine owners' refusal to sign a collective contract. In one town, villagers clashed with and were teargassed by security forces; some were wounded and taken to a local hospital.

Argentine health and education workers hold three-day strike over salaries

Health and education workers in Río Gallegos, Santa Cruz province, Argentina voted in assembly in the Zonal Hospital September 9 to strike for 72 hours beginning the next day. The workers also determined to adhere to a provincial strike called by their union, the State Workers Association (ATE), for September 15.

The workers, who are demanding a salary raise, have complained that the province has ample funds derived from petroleum, gold and fishing, and with a "government that lives giving away those resources."

ATE scheduled another assembly for the 15th to decide on further steps to take if the government refuses to grant the raise. A spokesperson told *Tiempo Sur*, "We the education, superintendent, administrative workers, etc., who carry out thousands of functions and give our lives so that the schools are in good condition, live and work our fingers to the bone all our lives to end the month getting a salary that doesn't cover anything."

Striking Argentine vegetable oil workers demand reinstatement of fired coworkers

Workers at the Alimentos Tancacha grain and soy processing plant in the province of Córdoba, Argentina went on indefinite strike September 10. The striking workers, who process soybeans and corn into oil, are members of the Tancacha Oil Workers Union.

In mid-August, the company fired two workers without cause, and the provincial Labor Ministry decreed a 15-day period for "obligatory conciliation," which it then extended for 10 more days. The union and management failed to reach an agreement. Union secretary general Miguel Ángel Ferreyra said that the strike would hold until the workers, both of whom have more than seven years of seniority, are reincorporated.

According to Ferreyra, at about 4 a.m., "the police and infantry arrived, by order of the business, and repressed the compañeros that they encountered there. The enterprise does not permit the workers to have delegates; we decided to give help from the syndicate and delegates are arriving from other provinces."

Puerto Rican medical workers protest changes to medical plan

A group of employees of Puerto Rico's Medical Services Administration (ASEM) picketed at the Medical Center plaza in Río Piedras on September 10 to protest changes in their medical plan. The protesters accused their provider, Triple-S, a subsidiary of Blue Cross/Blue Shield, of arbitrarily imposing increases in deductibles.

In a press conference, Manuel Perfecto Torres, president of the General Workers Union (UGT), accused ASEM of adding US\$1,200,00 of costs to employees covered by its medical plan, "despite the fact that there is the same medical-hospitalization

coverage that there was before.”

Torres added that the deductible payments on generic drugs would rise from zero to \$3 and from \$10 to \$18 for brand name drugs. Triple-S has also restricted the list of pharmacies approved under the plan.

St. Lucian firefighters continue strike over working conditions

As of September 10, firefighters in the St. Lucia Fire Service Association (SLFSA) held to their strike begun September 1 to demand action regarding blatant discrimination, lack of transparency, inconsistency and abuse of power by senior officers.

The SLFSA held a meeting with National Security Minister Victor La Corbiniere on September 5. Shortly afterwards, the government announced the “secondment” (transfer to another job) of Fire Chief Leslie Fontenelle. However, SLFSA officials allege that other outstanding issues have not been addressed, and the job action has continued.

La Corbiniere responded by accusing the union of “playing its own political game” and said that the government would be making “harsh decisions” regarding the strike. He also denounced other unions, including the Trade Union Federation (TUF), for expressing solidarity with the firefighters.

California municipal workers strike over unilateral imposition of concessions

City workers in Vacaville, California went on strike September 10 after the city council voted the previous evening to impose a 21.5 percent wage cut on members of the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 39. Teamsters transit workers refused to cross picket lines and managers were forced to try to replace drivers to get the city’s bus system operating.

In the last round of bargaining, Local 39 and eight other city bargaining units accepted draconian concessions. But Local 39 sued the city over the concessions and got their pay restored in July 2013. One newspaper charged the city “capitulated” to the union. This time, the city council voted unanimously to impose the concessions after declaring an impasse in negotiations.

For more than a year and a half, the union attempted to offer alternative concession packages to the city. But workers insisted on a “sunset date” for the concessions to expire and their former wages and benefits restored. The city refused to entertain any possibility of a giveback of the concessions.

Tentative agreement in Illinois teachers’ strike

Negotiators for the school board and the union representing striking teachers in Highland, Illinois reached a tentative agreement September 13. New details were released as members of the Highland Education Association met the following day to consider the mediated agreement.

Teachers walked off the job on September 10 after voting by a 139-16 margin to reject an earlier offer. According to sources, teachers opposed that one-year proposal that included a small raise and a \$500 stipend. Besides wages, benefits were also to have been a major reason for the walkout last week.

According to the school board, the state of Illinois owes Highland School District \$4 million due to lost state revenue sources over the last four years. School superintendent Michael Sutton indicated there were “other factors working against us as well including local revenue” due to the mortgage crisis.

Saskatchewan food mill workers locked out

Thirty-four workers at the Richardson Milling oat plant in Martensville, Saskatchewan, north of Saskatoon, were locked out last week after voting to reject to continue the terms of the last contract and instead go on strike.

Workers at the plant are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) who are fighting for wage increases in a new contract to bring them to par with other trades. Richardson bought the plant in 2013, continuing terms of the old contract, which made wage increases based on performance rather than on a set salary grid with defined job qualifications, which the union is seeking in order to make provisions more even and transparent.

The company has said that operations will continue at the plant throughout the dispute, using outside management personnel to fill in. No date has yet been set for a return to contract talks.



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