

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 January 2015

Latin America

Peruvian municipal trash collection workers strike for pay, bonus

On December 30, trash collection workers in the city of Chiclayo, located in the northwestern coastal Lambayeque region, began an indefinite strike. About 1,200 municipal workers took part in the action in Peru's fourth-largest city, which generates about 500 tons of trash per day.

The workers marched from union headquarters along Chiclayo's main streets to the mayor's office, where they demanded the completion of the payment of a promised bonus—of which the city has only paid 30 percent—as well as the second of their semimonthly paychecks for December and their year-end bonus.

Strike by Colombian judicial workers continues following failed meetings

A strike by Colombian judicial workers is nearing the three-month mark with no end in sight. The court employees, members of the Asonal Judicial union, which represents employees of the judicial branch, district attorneys' offices and the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute, walked out on October 9 over salaries, scant resources, congestion and proposed reforms being debated in Congress.

Workers have held protests, and the union has held meetings with government reps, but the two sides have not reached an agreement.

Asonal had scheduled to meet with representatives of the Attorney General's office, the Superior Court and the national government on December 30, but without result. Union president Fredy Machado told Caracol Radio that "the accord that we proposed to lift the strike was that a negotiation board be created to discuss salary bonuses and the reintegration of 1,700 colleagues, especially from Cartegena, who have been fired, but they said 'No.' Not even the national government,

with the Justice Minister Yesid Reyes attended."

Machado reiterated the strike call to the bases, but said that the union was ready to negotiate anytime the government wanted and when it respected the conditions that Asonal proposed. Justice Minister Reyes has told reporters that the strike "has no justification," claiming that the proposed budget would resolve the issues.

Panama Canal expansion project workers return to work

Workers on the Panama Canal expansion project ended their strike January 3, after their union signed an agreement with the consortium overseeing the work. The workers, citing maltreatment by supervisors, hazardous working conditions and the firing of a union official, downed their tools on December 23.

The strike involved about 1,000 workers, around eight percent of the labor force working on the expansion project.

Citing construction workers union leader Abelardo Herrera, AFP reported, "The management agreed to an audit on overtime payments, compensation leave and work hours, as well as to reinstate a worker dismissed over a dispute with a supervisor." Other aspects of the accord are a high-level committee to decide on pay for strike days, measures to increase safety and avoid accidents, and the rehiring of the fired worker.

Honduran soccer players end strike over unpaid salaries

Following the signing of an agreement with club management, players in the Honduran soccer team Marathón returned to practice December 30, ending a strike that they began on the 20th. The players walked out over the nonpayment of wages dating back three months.

During the strike, the players, as well as their trainer, refused to practice or participate in two preseason "friendly games" scheduled in anticipation of tournament season play beginning January 16.

Although the players had declared that they would not return to work if they were not paid in full, the agreement stipulated a partial payment on the day of the return to practice and the payment of the rest of the back wages within 20 days.

The United States

US labor board sanctions concessions imposed on Northern New England telecom workers as strike continues

The National Labor Relations Board announced December 31 that telecom provider FairPoint Communications had carried on “good faith” negotiations leading up to its unilateral imposition of \$700 million in concessions on workers in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. FairPoint imposed the concessions back in August of 2014, after it declared insufficient a \$200 million concessions package put together by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Communications Workers of America (CWA).

When the CWA called a strike on October 17, it built up illusions that the labor board case, combined with endorsements from state politicians and US Senators Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders, could bring about a milder compromise.

Over the weekend, the unions went into closed-door mediated negotiations with FairPoint under conditions where the draconian concessions are now deemed legal. “We welcome this development and are hopeful the mediation leads to an agreement that’s good for our members, our customers, and the future health of the company,” said Glenn Brackett of IBEW Local 2320. “We have been willing to compromise from the beginning, but it takes two to negotiate.”

Besides wage and benefit concessions, FairPoint is seeking contract language that will permit the use of out-of-state contractors to carry out telecom maintenance and outsource call-center work to foreign companies. There is a growing consensus that Fairpoint is seeking concessions in an effort to make its operations saleable. The top five shareholders are hedge funds that control 54.1 percent of the company.

Meanwhile, business and residential customer complaints have mushroomed throughout northern New England with little response by the company. Maine’s Office of the Public Advocate admitted that 2012 state legislation severely deregulated telecom, “The rules have been recently changed to dramatically reduce the level of regulation that FairPoint is subject to, so we really have very little leverage now in terms of trying to get them to fix these issues.”

Canada

BC Rail workers get New Year’s lockout notice

Some 126 rail yard workers in Burnaby, British Columbia, in the province’s lower mainland, received a lockout notice on New Year’s Eve from Southern Railway (SRY) after they overwhelmingly rejected the company’s final offer.

Workers at SRY, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), voted nearly unanimously in November in favor of strike action, but to date union leaders have resisted calling a strike. The company, which is a major freight transporter in BC, has made clear its intention to maintain rail service in the event of a strike or lockout with the use of replacement workers.

Outstanding issues in the dispute include contracting out, job security, overtime and retirement benefits. No union meetings are scheduled, and currently there are no plans for talks with the company.

Ontario blood service workers set to strike

Over 800 workers employed by Canadian Blood Services (CBS) across the province of Ontario, are set to go on strike January 8 if ongoing negotiations do not produce a settlement.

The workers affected are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), who last month obtained an overwhelming strike vote from over 35,000 members for contracts that expired at the end of December, including that covering CBS workers.

The workers at CBS are employed in blood supply and distribution, and union leaders warn that the concessions being demanded by the employer, which include job cuts and speedups, would pose a serious risk to the public. Contract talks resumed on January 5, in spite of the threat of strike action.



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