

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 April 2015

Latin America

Chilean airline workers' strike over wages, benefits in second week

Following a new April 13 wage offer from Chile's LAN Express negotiators, the airline's maintenance, passenger service and cargo workers for the LATAM Airlines subsidiary remained on the strike they began April 8. A union spokesman told reporters that the company's offer was slightly above its original 4 percent offer, but far from the union's 15 percent demand.

In addition, the offer would only apply to 605 of the 881 workers, according to the spokesman. A meeting on April 16 failed as well to reach an agreement.

Although company officials claimed that LATAM had contingency plans in place, and that the workers were a small percentage of total employees, they admitted that about 30 flights were being delayed daily.

On April 14, LATAM union leaders from Chile, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil and Paraguay held a meeting in Santiago. They issued a statement that they were "unanimous in denouncing the anti-worker practices and the multiple conflicts with aviation workers throughout the region."

Brazilian public sector employees protest outsourcing bill

In the week after workers in Brazil's private sector protested proposed national legislation to expand and facilitate outsourcing, the nation's public sector employees joined another round of anti-outsourcing actions this week. Bank workers, train conductors, bus drivers and other public employees were among those who participated in mobilizations on April 15.

Actions included strikes at state-owned factories and municipal mass transit systems, in addition to job actions at auto factories and ports. In some states, protesters temporarily blocked highways, and in São Paulo, access to the Guarulhos airport was blocked for about 30 minutes.

Outsourcing of public sector services is currently officially banned in Brazil. Workers fear that the law would chip away at wages and benefits and undercut collective bargaining.

The bill has already passed in the lower house, and it is likely that the upper house will approve it as well. President Dilma Rousseff is expected to veto the bill, but Congress has the power to override it.

Venezuela bottling plant workers strike to demand discussion of contract

Workers at the Empresas Polar bottling plant in Turmero, in the northern Venezuelan state of Aragua, struck April 17 to demand discussions of a contract to bring higher wages and other demands.

At a press conference, Frank Quijada, president of the brewery workers' union, Sintracerviv, denounced Polar for a long history of refusal to agree to workers' demands, and for abuses against workers. Quijada had previously called on President Nicolas Maduro to intervene to force the company to bargain in good faith.

He said that the workers "have decided that we are going to submit to a solidarity strike in accord with article 490 of the Organic Labor Law for Workers (LOTTT) and give forceful support to our compañeros. Enough already of Empresas Polar's continuing to abuse, threaten and change the panorama; they are violent."

In 15 months, Polar has only signed 18 out of 106 clauses in the contract. Several plants have already carried out industrial actions. Workers have complained of being intimidated by armed persons. The company has accused striking workers of violent behavior, but the union denies the accusations.

Colombian mineworkers strike over workday change

Some 550 workers at the Cerro Matoso nickel mine in Colombia's northern Córdoba department downed their tools April 14 to protest the company's attempts to impose a new work schedule.

The Sintracerrromatoso union denounced the "unilateral and nonconsultative" manner in which the company, a division of Australian conglomerate BHP Billiton, installed a four-day, 12-hour regime. Union leader Domingo Hernandez Garcia told *El Colombiano*, "The enterprise wants to gain productivity and lower expenses at the cost of the workers and we cannot allow this because it is against the law."

On the evening of April 14, a group of workers sealed off access to the mine, paralyzing activity and blocking access to the open-pit mine. The company has called on the Labor Ministry to confirm the ceasing of activities in order to permit the company to initiate legal actions and get it declared illegal.

Colombian teachers protest, announce strike to improve education

Teachers in Neiva, the capital of the south central Colombian department of Huila, gathered and marched in the city's main streets April 16. The protest was called to announce an indefinite national strike on April 22, "since the national government has not had the will to improve education in Colombia," according to a statement by the Fecode and Adih teachers' unions.

Among the improvements to be demanded by the mobilization are a different school day than that proposed by the national government; three grades of preschool; modernization of educational infrastructure; more school eating facilities with more nutritious meals; recognition of a decent salary for educational workers; and general physical conditions that optimize education in Colombia.

Mexican judicial workers strike for improved working conditions, pay

More than 200 judicial workers in the Mexican state of Jalisco struck April 15 to demand better working conditions and salaries. Protests and strikes took place simultaneously in Puerto Vallarta, Autlán de la Grana, Ciudad Guzmán, Sayula, Zacoalco, La Barca, Lagos de Moreno, Tamazula and Ameca and other locations.

A spokesman for the workers told reporters that they have not received a significant raise in 17 years. They are also demanding overtime pay, respect for the salary scale, payment of the year-end bonus and of major medical expenses as required by law.

The judicial workers have submitted petitions to address these and other issues since 2014, a situation of which the workers have "had their fill," according to the spokesman.

The United States

SEIU calls off strike after request from Connecticut governor

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) complied with Connecticut governor Dannel Malloy's request to postpone a strike by 3,500 nursing home workers scheduled to begin April 24. The workers were demanding increased wages and benefits at 27 nursing home facilities run by three major nursing home chains—Genesis, iCare and Paradigm.

A spokesperson for the governor's office declared a strike "not helpful" and said the request was for a "cooling off" period. The SEIU says more than 50 percent of non-nursing staff workers are paid less than \$15 an hour, and the workers have adopted the demand that those low wages be raised to the \$15 minimum. They say they are tired of working 70 to 80 hours a week to make ends meet. But the SEIU agreed to call off the strike despite the fact that Malloy has not endorsed the \$15 minimum wage.

Currently, the Connecticut legislature is working on the state's budget. According to a spokesman for the Connecticut Association of Health Care Facilities, staffing constitutes 70 percent of nursing home costs and Medicaid payments fall \$28 below the daily cost for Medicaid recipients. "Increasing employee wages and benefits can only be reasonably expected when overdue Medicaid dollars are provided to all nursing facility operators," he said.

By calling off the strike, the SEIU has subordinated the struggle of the workers to the nursing homes and legislature. An SEIU spokesperson said, "It is our hope that the Governor and legislators take this opportunity to make a fair wage for caregivers."

Canada

Toronto-area teachers on strike

A total of 1,550 teachers at 22 high schools are on strike this week in the Durham region northeast of Toronto, and the union is threatening to announce further strikes at other school boards across the province.

Negotiators for the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) say they suspended talks last week at the central bargaining table because the two sides were too far apart on every issue to avoid a strike. Teachers in Ontario have been working without a contract for more than six months.

The Ontario Liberal government has made it clear that it will not increase funding for education to meet teachers' demands, and it is also facing strike action by elementary school teachers in the province. No talks are currently scheduled, and 24,000 students are off school until the strike is resolved.

Manitoba mining machinists set to strike

Two hundred workers employed by Hudbay Minerals Inc. in the city of Flin Flon in northern Manitoba could be off the job this week after voting overwhelmingly in favor of strike action in March and voting this week on a contract that their union is not recommending.

The leadership of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), which represents machinists at Hudbay, say that the final offer from the company does not come close to expectations, and last week they asked their members to remove their tools from the plant. There are clear indications that Hudbay is preparing to use replacement workers in the event of a strike.

Machinists at Hudbay have been working without a contract since January 1, and there are six other unions at the Flin Flon plant that have yet to take strike votes.



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