Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 July 2015

Strike at the public radio system in Argentina

Employees of Argentina's 48 local public radio stations under Radio Nacional, followed up last week's 24-hour strike with a two-day strike Monday and Tuesday this week. The main issue is wages. In negotiations, management offered the government ceiling of a 27.4 percent wage increase on a one-year contract, way below the rate of inflation. The workers are also demanding that contingent workers at Radio Nacional be given regular status.

On Wednesday, having been stonewalled by management, the workers decided on a strike of an indefinite duration. At that point, the government stepped in and imposed a 15-day mandatory conciliation that, under Argentine law, prevents job actions during this cooling-off period. The unions representing the radio employees decided not to defy the government order.

A year-and-a-half ago, in November 2013, Public Television management sacked 50 musicians who had worked on a contingent basis for a decade for both TV and radio. At the time, Radio Nacional, TV and newspaper employees demonstrated in the musicians' defense, despite official union indifference.

Argentina: Steel workers occupy plant

On July 8, steel workers occupied the PRIMA steel company in Bahía Blanca, on the Argentine coast. Three years ago, the plant employed 120 workers; it is now down to 14, who have not been paid for two months. Contributions have not been made for social benefits for over a year and a half.

The protesting workers reject PRIMA management's claim that there is no money. Negotiations since the occupation began have produced no results. The workers have also been abandoned by their union, the Metalworkers Union (UOM) and ignored by the Labor Ministry.

Thousands of teachers march in Mexico City

On July 10, 20,000 teachers marched in Mexico City, repudiating government evaluation mandates. The march was in response to a press offensive against the professors, who oppose punitive evaluations. Many teachers marched with handmade signs that called for defiance of the evaluations as unjust. Teachers insist that they do not object to being evaluated, but suspect that the purpose of the evaluation is to fire teachers.

The dissident teachers union, the CNTE, has opposed the evaluations, which were mandated by the education reform act (Reforma Educativa), passed by the Peña Nieto administration as part of a bundle of neoliberal reforms that include the privatization of public schools.

Marches took place in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero and Morelos. The CNTE is preparing a mass demonstration on July 15, the day in which evaluation tests will be given for new teachers. In Morelos, teachers wore t-shirts with the slogan: "I teach; for the government I am dangerous, because I teach how to think," and "When a law is unjust it is just to disobey –Mahatma Gandhi"

Thousands of students rally against new criminal law in Brazil

Several thousand students and young workers marched in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to protest a draft law in Brazil's House of Deputies that would lower the age of liability for criminal acts.

In São Paulo, the march and rally included hundreds of high school students participating in the protest. The law would increase jail time for youth between the ages of 16 and 18 that are convicted in criminal trials.

Workers at the Institute for Social Security join Brazil

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national strike wave

A strike by employees of the INSS (Instituto do Seguro Social), Brazil's social and medical services agency, began on Tuesday in Brazil. The issue is wages and jobs. The INSS workers are demanding a 27 percent wage increase, that past bonuses be rolled into the base compensation, and better working conditions.

While inflation this year in Brazil is expected to be nine percent, INSS strikers point out that their wages have not kept up with inflation in the last three years. The 27 percent would barely make up for their loss in purchasing power since 2012.

The strike is affecting INSS facilities in 16 Brazilian states and involves 30,000 workers. Many medical workers, members of a different union that is not on strike, also walked out in solidarity with the INSS workers.

The walkout takes place under conditions of crisis for the INSS. Demands for social services are increasing while contributions are decreasing.

The INSS strike is part of a general strike wave of public employees, that includes workers at the National Health Surveillance Agency, Labor and Planning Ministries, Court workers, and other public employees. In all, about 90,000 public workers are on strike.

Judge orders end to New York City cement workers' strike

Union cement workers returned to work at 30 New York City construction sites July 6, two days after a district court judge issued a restraining order backed up by the threat of potential contempt charges if workers refused to end their six-day strike. Southern District Court judge Edgardo Ramos charged that the strike violated a Project Labor Agreement (PLA), which bars strikes on large construction sites.

The Cement League, which represents the employers, charged that 12 of the sites, including the Hudson Yards and the World Trade Center 3, came under the PLA agreement. The New York City District Council of Carpenters, which represents the striking workers, appealed to workers, "As a show of good faith to the Cement League we would strongly urge each and every member to return to work on Monday. … Failure to comply with the judge's order may lead to contempt by those in violation of this order."

The carpenters union has claimed that it ordered workers on the 12 PLA sites to observe the no-strike clause, indicating that the workers closed down those sites in opposition to the labor bureaucracy. The strike came as a result of failed negotiations and the expiration of the contract on July 1. New negotiations were supposed to resume once workers ended the strike.

Deal reached in protracted canning strike

The 22-month-long strike by 120 workers at can manufacturer Crown Holdings in Toronto could come to an end if a tentative deal is ratified by the membership this weekend.

The workers are represented by the United Steelworkers Union (USW) and have been forced to watch from their picket lines as replacement workers took their jobs since just after the strike began. While details of the proposed settlement will not be made public until after the ratification vote, the company has made clear its intentions to keep a number of the scab workers on when the strike is over.

Last month a government-appointed inquiry delivered its report confirming that the company's illegal actions prolonged the strike. Workers at Crown Holdings have been hung out to dry by their union leadership, who offered no means to win the strike outside of a belated and ineffective appeal to the public to buy their beer in bottles rather than cans.

Crown Holdings is one of the wealthiest companies in North America, employing 22,000 workers in 41 countries around the world.

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