

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 July 2015

## Chilean bus drivers strike over stalled contract talks

Bus drivers who ply the 24-mile (40-km) route between the Chilean cities of Concepción and Lota began an indefinite strike at midnight July 23. The drivers stopped work to protest the lack of progress in contract talks between their union and management.

The demands of the union include regulation of the frequency of trips, revision of the labor contract and the ability to drive along metropolitan Concepción's "spinal column," Los Carrera Avenue. Some 370 buses belonging to six transport lines stopped circulation.

## Worker dies during strike at Chilean copper mine

A striking worker died of a heart attack after being shot in the leg by a Chilean police special forces officer while participating in a strike and protest July 24 at a copper mine.

Nelson Quichillao Lopez, 47, was among the striking contract workers at copper giant Codelco's El Salvador mining complex, located at an altitude of 2,600 meters (8,530 ft.) in the Andes, 1,100 km (683 mi.) north of Santiago. The workers had walked out July 21 to demand that their wages, benefits and conditions be on a par with those of regular workers.

At dawn, the police, supposedly in response to workers "using heavy machinery, that was putting the integrity and life of a police officer on the ground at risk," fired at the workers, hitting Quichillao Lopez in the leg. He suffered cardio respiratory failure and died. Another worker suffered injuries and was taken to a local clinic.

## 24-hour strike by Brazilian oil workers over planned cutbacks

Workers at Brazil's Petrobras oil company held a one-day strike July 24 to protest plans by the firm's board of directors to carry out divestments and downsizing. The striking workers, members of the FUP oil workers federation, picketed refineries, supply terminals and oil platforms and prevented nonstriking employees from entering.

Petrobras, which is embroiled in a number of corruption scandals, has a debt of US\$120 billion. Following a meeting on the 24th, the board announced plans to sell off US\$15.1 billion in assets, touching off the strike call. Another object of the strike was a bill before the Congress that would further open up offshore oil fields to other companies. The law would eliminate Petrobras's right to a minimum of 30 percent of exploration and production contracts.

## Brazilian taxi drivers protest private driver service

Early in the morning of July 24, taxi drivers in Rio de Janeiro held a protest against the Uber private driver service. The protesting drivers—estimated at up to 1,500—parked their cabs along major roads, in some cases blocking traffic.

Uber has drawn protests by cabbies in several countries because it is unregulated and its drivers—which the company categorizes as "contractors"—lack benefits, thus making overhead costs lower. Some cities, like São Paulo and Brasilia, have passed laws against Uber.

In Bangalore, India, Uber drivers themselves staged a protest over discrepancies in payments by the multinational company.

## Panamanian beer workers' strike enters third week

July 23 marked the completion of two weeks in which workers at Panama's Cerveceria Nacional have been on strike with no end in sight. The workers, members of the Beer Industry Workers Union of Panama (STICP), voted July 10 by a wide margin to walk out following management's intransigence in addressing the union's demands in contract talks. The strike affects all points of production and distribution in the country.

According to STICP, the company has withheld wages for the first half of July "as a means of reprisal." The firm refuses categorically to sit down to negotiate because the contract "is full of benefits for the workers," union subsecretary general Juan de la Cruz told reporters.

Two of the primary demands are a minimum wage for all workers and the establishment of Sunday as a day of rest.

While workers have complained of being ignored and underreported in the media., they have expressed gratitude to the town's residents. "We eat what the people bring us, which shows solidarity," said one striking worker.

## Antiguan construction workers strike, protest low wages

For the second time this year, construction workers at a government housing project in Antigua struck and staged a protest over poor pay. On July 21, workers at the Dredge Bay site downed their tools and protested for a brief period.

The Dredge Bay project is a "flagship" housing program promoted by Antigua and Barbuda prime minister Gaston Brown to build 2,000 affordable residences. Workers had already protested their miserable wages as well as pay irregularities on March 30, but returned to the job when reassured by management that their concerns would be addressed.

Another issue that brought on the protest was the news that the National Housing Development and Urban Renewal Company was planning to extend the probation period for some workers. At least 70 workers have said that they were misinformed on the process. The Antigua Trades &

and Labour Union, which does not represent the workers, has said that the union will bring the problems before management, but that the workers have to be unionized first.

### **Sit-in by Antiguan hospital workers for overdue pay, better working conditions**

Workers at the Clarevue Psychiatric Hospital in Antigua staged a sit-in on July 21 to protest poor working conditions, inadequate staff and unpaid overtime pay, some dating back to July 2014. About 110 workers have not received payment for overtime.

Workers have endured poor working conditions for years, Antigua & Barbuda Public Service Association Executive Director Darren Gibbs told the *Antigua Observer*. "They complained of severe strain, especially in the night when only two workers are assigned 45 females and two workers attend 95 males in that section. They have been asking for proper staffing and it just have been getting worse over the years," Gibbs said.

After a meeting with Gibbs, hospital official Walton Edwards said that the monies would be paid as soon as it is available and that he has been in constant contact with the Treasury. Edwards notified the workers, but he admitted, "Some of them were not happy because they mentioned they were already promised, but I can only communicate what the Treasury has told me." He claimed as well that staff had not informed him about working conditions.

### **Jamaican irrigation workers strike over treatment of coworker**

About 100 workers for Jamaica's National Irrigation Commission walked off the job July 20 following a disciplinary action against a fellow worker. As part of the protest action, several irrigation systems were locked down.

Workers have complained of management's disciplinary actions before, and wrote to Agriculture Minister Derrick Kellier in June asking him to intervene, but he did not respond.

The state minister of agriculture met with an official from the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union and reached an agreement to have another meeting "sometime this week," as reported by *rjrnews.com*. BITU chief organizer Colin Virgo told the workers to return to work.

### **Trinidad and Tobago: Protests by lifeguards and beach workers against overwork**

Lifeguards and beach facility workers in Trinidad and Tobago held a protest in front of the Prime Minister's office in the tony neighborhood of St. Clair, Port au Prince July 23. The demonstrators protested their work schedules, which have been changed from five days a week with two weekends per month to every day of the month without a break.

The National Union of Government and Federated Workers (NUGFW), which represents the beach workers, has called for the removal of Permanent Secretary Donna Ferraz, who it says has tried to change working conditions for Ministry of Tourism employees to their detriment. An NUGFW official criticized Ferraz for her "harsh and unpleasant manner" and, despite her claims of a staff shortage, foot dragging on

classifying lifeguards.

### **Three-day strike by Massachusetts health care workers**

Workers at several facilities in Massachusetts operated by Clinical & Support Options (CSO) ended their three-day strike July 24. The Service Employees International Union Local 509, which represents about 350 of the 580 workers at the behavioral health agency, called the protest strike over a variety of issues including pay, benefits, productivity rules and reimbursements.

Negotiations, which began in October of last year, broke down on July 21 and workers walked out at facilities in Greenfield, Northampton, Springfield, Athol and Pittsfield. Management issued emails to workers threatening their benefits and the use of replacement employees. According to one worker who spoke to the *Recorder*, "And it worked, because a lot of people are living week-to-week financially because our wages are so low."

CSO president and CEO Karin Jeffers bragged that more than 70 percent of the workforce either didn't walk out or came back to work before the end of the three-day strike. Another striker in his third year at CSO works a position paying \$12.25 an hour that requires a bachelor's degree. He estimates that he will be making less than \$15 an hour by the time he reaches age 40.

Management offered a three percent pay raise for full-time workers, but only provided a one percent pay increase for what are called fee-for-service employees who comprise 60 percent of the bargaining unit.

### **Vancouver Island city workers take job action**

46 municipal workers in the town of Qualicum Beach, BC on Vancouver Island, began limited strike action last weekend after working without a contract since 2013 and after mediated talks broke down last month.

Although the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) issued the strike notice to the town last week, union leaders say that, for now, town workers will stay on the job but under an overtime ban. Union leaders says they want to minimize the impact on the public and are only seeking wage increases in line with other jurisdictions in the region.

The union is asking for two percent annual wage increases in a new four-year contract for those affected by the job action, which includes both inside and outside municipal workers.

### **Toronto area city workers set to strike**

Nearly 500 municipal workers in the City of Barrie, an hour north of Toronto, are in a legal strike position this week after their union, CUPE, filed a "no-board" report with the Ministry of Labour last week.

Workers have been employed under the terms of their last contract that expired at the end of last year. It provided a three percent wage increase over two years. Workers affected include those employed in parks and recreation, water and sewage treatment as well as administrative and building services.

Mediated talks were underway last week and fire and waste

management services will continue under essential service provisions.

### **Protracted canning strike ends in Toronto**

The 22-month-long strike by 120 workers at can manufacturer Crown Holdings in Toronto has finally ended after the membership ratified a new contract July 19.

The final deal was reached after the company dropped its refusal to allow 34 leading union advocates to keep their jobs. The contract also contains enhanced retirement and severance provisions for those workers who choose not to return to their jobs.

Crown Holdings had hired replacement workers during the strike and it remains unclear who of these will be allowed to remain in their jobs. The company has 140 plants in 40 countries and is one of the world's largest manufacturers of beverage cans.



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