

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 September 2015

Latin America

Health workers in Argentina begin indefinite strike over unfulfilled contract provisions

At midnight on September 18, public health workers at hospitals and health centers in Argentina's Mendoza province began an indefinite strike. The action was called by the Mendoza Health Professionals Association (Ampros) to press the demand that the provincial government carry out provisions in the "Parity Accord" that it had agreed to last May.

Workers in the State Workers Association (ATE) joined the stoppage. ATE members blocked a street in front of the Government House.

The principal issues are the payment of a raise, retroactive pay and a productivity bonus promised in the agreement. Workers have also denounced the woeful state of infrastructure and chronic supply shortages. Ampros said, however, that it would call its members back to work upon delivery of the overdue money.

Striking Argentine trash collectors return to work following signing of agreement

Municipal trash collection workers in the Argentine city of Oran were called back to work by their union September 18, the day after they had walked out over the demand for unpaid bonuses that were due September 15.

After a meeting between the workers and the mayor, in which he promised not to dock their pay for the time on strike, but threatened to do so if they continued the walkout, the workers returned to the job.

However, workers in one neighborhood, Colonia Santa Rosa, remained on strike, citing the fact that they had only received half of their overdue wages for August.

Half-day national strike by Uruguayan teachers and other workers over education budget demands

For the fifth time since he came to office on March 1, Uruguay's president, Tabare Vasquez, was confronted by a national strike, this time of teachers as well as other workers. The four-hour strike and protest took place in the context of discussions in the legislature of the national budget.

The teachers are demanding that Vasquez stick by his promise of 6 percent of gross domestic product to the education sector. The official proposal is less than 5 percent. Uruguay's economy has deteriorated, with rising inflation and unemployment alongside falls in exports and shrinking demand.

The PIT-CIT labor federation, which also called the strike, added a wage raise and increased public spending to the budget demand. In the morning, workers marched through downtown Montevideo

to the Legislative Palace.

Brazil: Agricultural export agents strike for higher pay

Federal agricultural agents for Brazilian ports stopped work on September 17 in a bid for a raise. The agents are responsible for approving shipments and issuing certificates at Brazil's ports, borders and airports.

The agents' union, Anffa, is demanding a salary hike to compensate for Brazil's inflation rate of 9.53 percent, which has whittled away at their purchasing power. In Santos, the main agricultural products port, union negotiators and the Anec cereal exporters association are negotiating directly, while talks are also taking place in Brasilia, the nation's capital.

The agents have not interfered with the shipment of perishables and live cargos, but shipments of corn and other cereals, as well as poultry, eggs and pork, have been affected. Shipments of soybeans, which are barely in the planting phase, have not been affected. Adherence to the strike has been from 70 to 100 percent, according to Anffa.

Bolivian public works employees strike to demand unpaid wages, sacking of project official

Public works project employees in the southern Bolivian city of Tarija went on strike September 17. Some 1,600 workers, mostly women, are currently employed by the Urgent Productive Employment Program (PEUP), which provides jobs in such areas as reforestation and tree nurseries in rural regions, and cleaning of streets, parks, plazas and other public places in urban areas.

The workers have three main demands: the firing of Secretary of Productive Development Fernando Barrientos; the payment of two months of unpaid wages; and rejection of the Ventanilla Unica (single window), a centralized hiring system.

Concerning the third demand, a spokeswoman for the striking PEUP workers told eldeber.com.bo that "we suspect that the auditor of the office is attempting to contract people from the union environment" instead of poor women who are the ostensible target of the program.

Striking workers have assembled at the entrance to the governor's office, where some of them have been fasting since the beginning of the strike. On September 19, they marched through the central city to dramatize their demands.

Mexican municipal workers strike over back pay

More than 160 workers for the city of Amacuazac, in southern Morelos state, Mexico, downed their tools September 18 to demand the payment of back pay and the return of the former mayor to his office. Some of the workers gathered at government facilities and blocked access to the buildings.

The workers demanded the payment of their quincena (twice-a-month wage payment) for the first half of September. The workers

had waited three days for the September 15 payment and finally went to the town hall to ask for it. They were told that the current mayor, Alejandro Luna Fitz, could not authorize the pay, since that responsibility had not been transferred from the ex-mayor, Noe Reynaldo.

Reynaldo was removed from office September 10 by a judge due to his failure to comply with a 2004 judgment to pay an ex-worker more than a million pesos (US\$60,076). The striking workers are demanding that he be returned to office so that they can get their pay.

Despite their protests, the city has stonewalled on their demands. A report by *La Unión* noted, “Extraofficial versions relate that the police elements indeed received the corresponding salary payments; however, the rest of the workers—at the close of this edition—have not received their salaries.”

Mexican water and sewerage workers down tools, demand raise

Workers for the Water and Sewerage Board of the City of Valles, in the north-central Mexican state of San Luis Potosi, walked off the job on the morning of September 19. The workers are demanding an 18 percent wage raise.

According to a report by planoinformativo.com, “The union members are completely willing to dialog; nonetheless there has not existed such intentions on the part of the municipal president, Juan Jose Ortiz Azuara, and they declared that it appears that the authorities want to bequeath the problem to the mayor-elect, Jorge Teran Juarez.”

Trinidadian security guards protest nonpayment of wages

Angered over broken promises regarding overdue wages, security guards for a highway construction project in Trinidad protested September 16. The guards, who work at the San Fernando to Point Fortlin Highway project, had been told in a September 2 memo by their employer, First Response Services Ltd., that they would receive their August pay after the September 7 general elections.

The elections came and went without any wages being paid, and management did not issue any statement. On September 18, the guards agreed to a partial payment of TT\$1,500 (US\$237). One guard, Lisa Ramdin, told *Newsday*, “It’s not what we really wanted but we took it because we have bills to pay. Management told us to come back next Friday [September 25] to collect the rest, I hope we get all that is owed to us.” First Response still owes over \$600,000 (US\$95,000) to workers for the month of August.

The United States

Washington state teachers defy judge order to end strike

Striking teachers in Kelso, Washington voted 221 to 20 on September 20 to defy a county superior court judge’s order to return to work or face penalties. Judge David Koss declared the strike, which began five days earlier, illegal.

Members of the Kelso Education Association have been without a contract since June and negotiations have been stalled over the

number of days faculty are paid for non-classroom work such as training, preparation and other school business. Currently, teachers receive 15 days of non-classroom pay. They are bargaining to receive an additional 13 days while the school district has clung to its demand to only eight additional days.

The Kelso school district filed a motion with the court on the first day of the strike declaring action by teachers was a “breach of the individual employment contracts between the district and union and caused “irreparable harm” to the district’s 5,000 students, compromising state funding and disrupting services for students who are disabled. Judge Koss took over the case after two superior court judges recused themselves without providing any reasons. Negotiations were to resume September 21, one day before teachers are ordered to be back in the classroom.

Canada

Quebec teachers to take job action

Thousands of French language schoolteachers across the province of Quebec will be staging one-day strikes in the coming weeks to protest drastic cuts introduced by the provincial Liberal government as well as the slow pace of contract negotiations.

According to the Fédération Autonome de L’Enseignement (FAE), which represents 34,000 teachers in eight unions in the province, budgets have been reduced by over \$1 billion under the current government. The FAE is mandated to carry out three one-day strikes but have so far only announced two days of job action with the first scheduled for September 30.

Teachers in Quebec work two weeks more than teachers in most other provinces and must pay their own health insurance, where in other provinces it is paid for them, and have fewer paid holidays than teachers in other provinces.

US Steel launches assault on Ontario steelworkers

In documents filed with the Ontario Superior Court, US Steel (USSC) is seeking to slash payments to pensioners, cut pension fund payments as well as health benefits for workers at its operations in and around Hamilton, Ontario.

In addition to cutting payments to workers, the company is asking for the elimination or reduction of property taxes and other payments to local and provincial governments.

The company claims that if it does not obtain the relief it is seeking it will have no choice but to cease Canadian operations at the end of this year.



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