

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 October 2015

Strike wave in Chile

Chile experienced a number of industrial actions last week. About 30 drivers for the Express del Transantiago public transportation system, part of over 250 drivers who walked off the job September 29, occupied the Santiago office of the International Labor Organization (ILO) on October 6 to dramatize their demands. They had struck in opposition to a proposed contract that imposes “restrictions on the salary raise and penalizes workers,” according to their union.

On October 10, the union and Transantiago signed an agreement, and the drivers were told to return to work on the 11th. Details of the deal were not reported on, except for a statement by management that it was “in line with the contracts undersigned in the last month of June.” The contract will be in effect until 2018.

Workers in the nation’s Civil Registry continued the strike that they began September 29 (see October 6 “Workers Struggles”) over a bonus that had been promised them by the previous justice minister and withdrawn by the current minister.

The Justice Ministry has refused to negotiate with them, threatening to dock their pay and using other public sector workers to scab on them. The Interior Ministry announced a “contingency plan” to transfer the services to city and regional governments and has already distributed some instructional documents.

Other public sector workers have engaged in industrial actions. According to a report in *radio.uchile.cl*, “Also, dentists and chemists who work in the public sector have added themselves with a 48-hour paralysis” on October 7 and 8. They “accuse discrimination on the part of the government, after the arriving at an agreement with the Medical College.”

Workers at a Nestlé food products plant, in Santiago as well, stopped work to protest abuses by the company and poor labor conditions. The workers held a demonstration that clogged traffic on a major central street.

Meanwhile, in the north, about 185 supervisors at the Radomiro Tomic Division mine of Codelco, Chile’s state copper mining company, went on strike October 8. They rejected the coal giant’s latest offer arising out of negotiations required by law after 96 percent rejected the previous offer on October 1. Among the supervisors’ demands is the regularization of the two-tier wage and benefits setup for old and new workers—i.e., a two-tier system.

The striking supervisors blocked the entrances to five divisions of the mine. Codelco announced that it had activated a contingency plan “that has as its principal objective to look after the security of those who continue working and assure operational continuity, which has not been affected until now.”

Brazilian bank employees walk out to demand pay increase

Bank employees in 17 of Brazil’s 27 states went on indefinite strike October 6 over pay and other demands. The bank workers, members of the 510,000-strong Contraf financial branch confederation, are employed in both public and private banks. Contraf is an affiliate of the CUT labor federation.

Contraf rejected the Fenaban bankers’ federation offer of a 5.5 percent raise and a one-time bonus of 2,500 reais (US\$625), saying that “it represents a real loss of 4 percent for salaries and other revenue...since accumulated inflation from August was put at 9.88 percent.” Contraf is calling for a 16 percent raise.

According to an AFP report, “Brazil’s five main banks—the private Unibanco, Bradesco and Santander, and the state-owned Banco do Brasil and Caixa Economica Federal—saw 60.3 billion reais in profits (\$15.5 billion at the time). That was an 18.5 percent rise over the previous year.” Contraf wants 7,246 reais (US\$1,810) per worker in profit sharing.

Additional demands include job security, equality of opportunity, “the end of moral harassment and of abusive goals.”

Bolivian fast-food workers strike

Workers for the Pollos Copacabana fast-food chain in La Paz, Bolivia, began an indefinite strike October 8. The striking workers marched through the city center over a number of demands.

The chain, which serves fried chicken (*pollo*), burgers, French fries and other fast foods, is known as the “McDonald’s of Bolivia.” It is also known for poor pay, violations of labor rights and refusal to address workers’ complaints.

The striking workers’ demands include the payment of overtime for Sundays, a production bonus, compliance with labor laws, an end to harassment and the firing of superiors who commit that harassment. The company so far has ignored their demands. The labor minister, in fact, admitted that she had received complaints that Pollos Copacabana did not allow their workers to leave at some locations, and that the company “doesn’t have the slightest disposition to resolve the conflict.”

Panamanian sanitation workers return to work after six-day strike

Sanitation workers responsible for trash pickup in Colón, Panama went on strike October 2 to demand a wage raise, reinstatement of four co-workers and new equipment. The workers, employed by private sanitation company Aguaseo, “hijacked” (per media reportage) 11 compactor trucks and 4 “ampliroll” hook lift vehicles and prevented them from being used. On the fifth day of the walkout, with trash piling up around the city, the Public Ministry ordered the removal and handing over of the vehicles, which they had kept parked on the side of a road.

The next day, after the Labor Development Ministry intervened, the workers agreed to resume work. Tripartite meetings were scheduled to take place that week.

Mexican transit workers hold one-day strike for overdue pay

Workers in the Metropolitan Zone Bus System (Sistecozome), in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, stopped work on October 6 to demand overdue pay, affecting bus services along five routes. By the end of the day, their union had signed an agreement with the government that met one of their demands.

The workers struck to demand the payment of a series of debts that Sistecozome owed them. Among those are the Public Services Day (October 9) bonus, amounting to 1,500 pesos (US\$91) per worker, the retroactive payment of 2,000 pesos (US\$122) to 650 workers (drivers, administrative and others) and revision of pending raises for 2014 and 2015.

However, the state secretary general stated that the only payment that the government had agreed to was the Public Services Day bonus, and that the rest, as reported by *Informador*, “will be themes that will be dealt with at a [negotiating] table between Sistecozome authorities, the secretaries of Administration, Planning and Finances, Labor and General...” The report added, “Moreover, the branch office announced that sanctions will apply against the drivers who did not go to work.”

Tennessee workers strike against working conditions at carpet equipment manufacturer

About 55 workers at Tuftco, a carpet equipment maker in Chattanooga, Tennessee, walked off the job October 7 over forced overtime and other issues. The members of the International Association of Machinists complain they have to work 44 to 60 mandatory hours of overtime a month. They want to set a ceiling of 24 mandatory hours and make all hours after that voluntary.

In the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse, workers lost their pensions, and the company does not match workers’ contributions to their 401(k) retirement plans. They also are raising safety concerns and are opposed to the company riding roughshod over seniority rights.

Some 40 percent of the workforce have been hired in the past

three years, and production has increased dramatically. But the company is refusing to consider the demands of the workers and has threatened to shift production to its three other non-union facilities—two in Dalton, Georgia, and one in Palmer, Tennessee. No new talks have been scheduled.

Quebec ferry workers strike

Some 150 ferry workers in the province of Quebec are on strike this week after working without a contract since March of this year.

The workers are represented by the Syndicat des Métallos whose leadership has indicated that they are prepared for a protracted strike if necessary. Earnings for workers have been reduced since the last contract expired, and union negotiators say they want to see a wage increase to replace the previous bonus system, which did not count toward their pension plan.

Workers affected include mechanics and navigation technicians who are legally required for ferry operation, but the provincial government has indicated it will attempt to maintain some service on the five affected lines under provisions of the essential services act.

Ontario school support workers take job action

Educational support workers across the province of Ontario are being called out on limited strike action even as elementary schoolteachers returned to the bargaining table after their own series of job actions.

Workers affected are represented by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) at both the elementary and secondary school levels. While the union is calling this a strike action, it only includes the withdrawal of some administrative and monitoring services.

These actions are part of an ongoing campaign against the “austerity agenda” of the provincial Liberal government that would see increases to class sizes and workloads for teachers and support staff in a new contract.



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