

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 July 2016

Mexican Uber drivers protest over pay and conditions

About 150 drivers for the Uber app-based passenger transport service held a protest in front of the firm's Mexico City branch July 16. The drivers—called socios (associates) by Uber, apparently to distinguish them from “workers”—protested against changes that have negatively affected their earning power as well as their security.

Drivers recounted some of the changes to which they have been subjected. One driver told reporters that when he started two and a half years ago, drivers worked 8 to 10 hours to earn a thousand pesos (US\$53.73), but now they had to put in 15 or 16 for the same amount. Drivers have been paid from 7 to 50 pesos (US\$0.37 to \$2.70) for trips of more than 15 kilometers (10 miles), despite the fact that they are supposed to receive 75 percent of the established fare. The drivers want a 20 percent raise in fares and a lowering of quotas.

The drivers' biggest complaint was against the recently established UberPool service, which requires the drivers to carry several different passengers at once. They said that since UberPool started, incidents of sexual abuse, robberies of both cash and cars, and assaults have increased. One driver told of a female rider who was subjected to an attempted kidnapping while he was transporting her. He reported the incident, but the company did nothing.

Drivers also complain that Uber's hiring standards have been lowered to meet demand. Whereas previously drivers had to take an 8-hour exam, have no criminal record, do an interview and pass a drug test, “nowadays they only take an exam that can be done on the Internet,” one driver told *razon.com.mx*.

Quitting is not an option for the drivers, since they have to provide their own vehicles, which cost 250,000 pesos (US\$13,400) at a minimum, and for which most of them are still paying. They have called for dialogue with Uber management, which so far has stonewalled. They say that they represent at least a third of Uber drivers nationwide, about 40,000, and they will consider radicalizing their actions if they do not get a positive response.

General strike in Uruguay draws over a million people

A 24-hour general strike call by Uruguay's PIT-CNT union federation for July 14 brought out over a million Uruguayans, in a nation of 3.2 million. This was the second recent nationwide job action; in June there was a four-hour nationwide stoppage. The main demands of the demonstrators were hikes in wages and raises based on inflation, currently running at nearly 11 percent.

Other demands were increases in public spending and pension reform. PIT-CNT spokespeople say that the mobilizations will

continue until the government takes action on their demands.

Argentine police fire on striking gas plant workers

At least 80 workers at the Ledesma gas plant in Jujuy, Argentina were injured when police attacked them with rubber bullets and tear gas July 13. The workers, members of the Ledesma Workers and Employees Union (Soeail), had rejected as insufficient the company's latest offer in parity talks, and voted to strike.

Soeail representatives have been engaged in negotiations with the firm, and have called for a 43 percent raise, a demand that the company rejected, offering 30.5 percent, later upping it to 34.5 percent. Soeail rejected the offer, which was 600 pesos (US\$40.21) less than a recently signed deal with workers at Ledesma's plant in San Isidro. The workers voted in assembly to strike, gathered at the entrance to the firm and attempted to occupy it. Units of the Infantry Guard sent to the site shot at the strikers, some from six feet away.

Ledesma is a diversified company, the largest in Argentina, and produces sugar, fruit and other foodstuffs, gas, paper and other commodities. Workers in Ledesma's sugar sector blocked a highway in solidarity with the gas workers.

In addition to the wage demand, Soeail indicated that Ledesma has not responded to a range of demands regarding work hours, categorizations, job security and bonuses for attendance and productivity.

Bus drivers in Argentina strike for delayed pay, end-of-year bonus

About 70 drivers for Cooperativa Alberdi, a bus company in La Banda, a city in Argentina's Santiago del Estero province, began an indefinite strike July 12. Delegates for the driver had met with the owner on July 11 to demand that he pay overdue wages, as well as the end-of-year bonus (aguinaldo) still owed them from 2015. He paid them half of the amount, but said that he was unable to pay them for this month.

A delegate complained to reporters that “for four or five months, the wages have been delayed.” On July 13, the drivers voted to extend their strike until the full amount was paid. The workers have appealed to the Labor Secretariat to intervene.

Chilean bank call center workers in seventh week of strike over working conditions, pay

Call center workers for Chile's Investment and Credit Bank (BCI) completed 46 days on strike July 15 over their low salaries and poor working conditions. The workers accuse BCI of not complying with labor laws and refusing to negotiate with them.

The striking workers have been targeted for repression as well. On a number of occasions they have been attacked by the Carabineros, the national police who played a prominent role in the 1973 coup. On June 28, Carabineros used water cannon, rubber bullets and batons on striking workers, arresting four. The president of the workers' union has also accused the government, particularly the Labor Minister Ximena Rincon, of "ensnaring" the process, making it difficult for the workers to negotiate.

The labor legislation under which BCI call center workers work dates from the days of the Pinochet dictatorship, and the bank is known for unscrupulous practices, illegal activities, "modern-day slavery" (in the words of an opposition legislator), and abysmal pay. The executive branch has ignored these conditions.

Union directors are evaluating lodging a complaint with the International Labor Organization.

Trinidadian landfill workers renew protests for overdue pay, working conditions

Workers at the Beetham Landfill in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, which is managed by the Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL), blocked the facility's entrance July 11, renewing their demand for back pay for the period 2011 to 2013.

The workers had already protested June 13 and were told that they would be paid at the end of the month, yet another promise unfulfilled. Robert Benacia, president of the Industrial, General and Sanitation Workers Union (IGSWU), told *newsday.co.tt*, "every time we take protest action, they just fabricate a story to keep workers quiet."

Some 330 workers from four SWCOL dump sites are affected by the delays. They have also complained about working conditions, which involve handling hazardous materials and unsanitary conditions, including nonfunctioning toilet facilities. On July 13, Benacia told the workers that SWMCOL informed the IGSWU that the workers would be paid half of the arrears with the balance to be paid in September.

Benacia admitted, "That did not go down well with the workers," who resolved to work on a "go-slow" basis until they get full pay.

Delta pilots union opens "strike center"

The union representing Delta Air Lines pilots has taken a number of measures aimed to deflect a profound anger among the union's rank-and-file over stalled contract talks. Last week, the union opened a "strike center" in Atlanta, Georgia and designated a "strike chairman, while the international leadership of the Air Line Pilots Association granted a request by its Delta affiliate for a \$5 million fund for "strike-

related-efforts."

Back in June, pilots picketed a Delta shareholders' meeting to express their dissatisfaction given the billions of profits the company has accrued since concessions were imposed during the company's bankruptcy case. Last July, pilots voted by a 65 percent margin to reject a tentative agreement that would have reduced profit sharing and imposed a new, draconian sick leave policy. Pilots are demanding an overall 40 percent pay increase across three years, with an immediate increase of 21 percent. They are also asking to maintain their current level of profit sharing.

At the end of March this year, the pilots' union requested federal mediation for the first time in 15 years. The two sides must still have an impasse declared and a cooling off period before a strike could be legally called.

City workers locked out in Labrador

Municipal workers in the Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador were locked out last week when talks for a new contract reached an impasse over wages and pensions.

Union negotiators for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents city workers, report that despite offering significant concessions on key areas including pensions, the Town chose to lock workers out rather than continue negotiations. Workers had delivered an overwhelming strike mandate early in the year to their union but union leaders chose not to strike.

The work stoppage affects both inside and outside workers, except those deemed essential, and all Town events have been cancelled.

Seniors' residence workers take job action in Quebec

Seventy-four workers at Résidences Soleil's Manoir Sainte-Julie, outside of Montreal, Quebec are taking limited job action this week after soundly rejecting three separate proposals from their employer in recent months.

The workers are represented by the Teamsters Union who, despite the fact that workers are only picketing on their breaks and days off, are calling this a strike. Union leaders are publicly boasting of their commitment to maintain resident's services throughout the job action. Workers are seeking a modest wage increase of \$1.50 an hour in a new two-year contract as well as a shift bonus. They have been working without a contract since September 2015.



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