

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 August 2016

Chilean bank call center workers end strike after nearly two months

After 58 days on strike, the union for workers at call centers for Chile's Credit and Investment Bank (BCI) ended their strike for better wages and benefits July 28 with the signing of an agreement. The approximately 300 workers, mostly women, had walked off the job to demand better salaries, bonuses, benefits and working conditions.

During the strike, the workers were subjected to attacks by Carabineros, the national police, who used water cannons, rubber bullets and batons, and arrested at least four. Meanwhile, BCI management stonewalled and dragged out the negotiations to wear the workers down. The labor minister was biased against the workers as well, pushing the signing of the deal.

Syndicate 1 leader Carolina Guerra told reporters, "We have a sensation of frustration," and complained that the money was running out, forcing them to accept management's offer of 470,000 pesos (US\$718). The two 15-minute breaks per day remain unchanged and there will be no bonuses.

Brazilian metro workers threaten strike for wage raise

Metro workers in Rio de Janeiro have threatened to go on strike on August 4, the day before the commencement of the Olympic Games. Eliel Vieira Santos Filho, head of the metro workers' union, Simerj, told reporters, "If there's no advance in the negotiations, there will be a strike at zero hour on August 4" for an indeterminate time.

Simerj is demanding a raise of 9.83 percent, in line with the inflation rate, while management is offering 5 percent, an amount that the union called "Olympic shame."

However, negotiations supervised by the Labor Ministry continue. If no headway is made by August 3, a general assembly will vote on what action to take next.

Workers in other sectors, including ground crew workers at Rio de Janeiro's airport and bus drivers in Natal, have declared strikes as the Olympics draw near.

Twice-weekly strikes by Brazilian customs officials over salaries continue

Since July 4, auditors and tax functionaries for inland customs houses at border crossings between Brazil and neighboring countries have struck every Monday and Thursday. The customs workers are holding the actions to demand salary adjustments, which the government has refused.

On July 28, some 700 trucks were held up except for those carrying perishables, live animals and medicine at the crossing of Foz do Iguaçu, which shares a border with Argentina and Paraguay and is Brazil's most important inland port. About 150 of the trucks were Argentine and 80 were from Paraguay.

Trinidadian postal and security workers protest for back pay

Post offices were closed and mail delivery was stopped as postal workers and security officers for Trinidad's National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited (MTS) began a two-day protest July 29 to demand payment of back wages. The workers demanded unpaid wages dating back to 2011 to 2013.

Promises to workers for payment in June, July and August were not kept. On the first day of the protest,

Postal Workers Union (PWU) president David Forbes met with Public Utilities Minister Ancil Antoine, emerging to say that Antoine had told him that the cabinet had earmarked 25 million Trinidad dollars (US\$3.75 million) for the postal workers with another 24 million in bonds.

Meanwhile, Antoine also met with the president of the Estate Police, Steve Smart, telling him that the 5,000 security guards would also receive \$24 million Trinidad dollars (US\$3.6 million) this week. The striking workers were told to return to work following the August 1 Emancipation Day festivities.

Strike by Haitian public hospital workers against conditions drags on

Doctors and other hospital workers Hospital of the State University of Haiti have been on strike since March to demand changes to the horrendous conditions of chronically underfunded public hospitals across the nation. The hospital is the largest and most important of Haiti's medical facilities, and is emblematic of the crisis in health care. Up to 12 public hospitals at a time have been struck since March.

Rats and flies are seen in the wards. Crucial medical supplies and basic supplies like surgical gloves, gauze and antiseptics are lacking. Electricity is undependable; in some cases, night-shift surgeons have had to use their cell phones for light in the midst of power outages. Angry relatives of patients often have threatened and assaulted doctors who cannot provide adequate services.

Pay is abysmal. Resident doctors have not had a raise in salaries—\$120 per month—since 1996. The doctors have lowered their demand of \$500 to \$360. The government has offered \$200.

The poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti's health crisis is dire. According to a July 25 *Jamaica Observer* report: "Life expectancy has long been the shortest in the Western Hemisphere. Mosquito-borne diseases, measles, meningitis and other scourges are common. Malnutrition and stunted growth are widespread. Cholera has killed at least 10,000 people since 2010, when it was introduced into the country, likely by U.N. peacekeeping troops."

The nation is in the midst of a political crisis as well, as different factions of the ruling class wrangle over the status of the interim president, following the reactionary

administration of Michel Martelli, who catapulted to power with the help of then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton and pursued pro-business policies.

Minnesota and Wisconsin nurses rally against cuts to health care plans

Hundreds of nurses at hospitals in Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin, carried out banner picketing July 27 to protest demands for health care concessions by company negotiators for Essentia Health. Some 1,300 members of the Minnesota Nurses Association have held 11 bargaining sessions with management since April and have been without a contract since June 30.

In a strategy similar to that of Allina Health in the Twin Cities, Essentia wants to gut union health care plans and force nurses to accept a greater burden of the cost. Essentia has also been unwilling to discuss improvements in staffing to increase patient safety. The union has no plans to strike with two bargaining sessions remaining.

City workers set to strike in BC

Municipal workers in the mountain community of Kimberley in southern British Columbia could be on strike this week after the latest round of mediation failed to resolve outstanding differences.

The main issues in dispute between the city and the United Steelworkers Union, representing workers, include vacation provisions, hours of work and job evaluations. Workers voted 99 percent in favor of job action in June but their union has repeatedly postponed any action.

Essential service provisions were agreed upon by the two sides last week, paving the way for a strike or lockout, but the union has said it is hopeful that a new round of mediated talks that has been scheduled for next week will be successful in reaching an agreement.



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