

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 August 2016

Costa Rican train engineers strike results in agreement

Engineers for the Costa Rica Railroad Institute (INCOFER) struck on August 16 after negotiations failed to produce a contract to replace the one that expired at 11:59 p.m. on August 15. The service transports workers and students daily between the capital San José and neighboring cities and provinces. Last year, trains carried around 3.7 million commuters around Cartago, Heredia and San José.

INCOFER contracted a new company called Catenaria to take over at the end of the old contract, but the firm did not come to agreement on demands for better working conditions, higher wages, provision of raingear, between-shift rest areas and other issues. As the strike went on, the parties continued to negotiate.

After 10 hours, the engineers' lawyer announced that "the new employer agreed to review current salaries and make a proposal in the next two weeks. ... Negotiations also included an agreement to provide employees with new uniforms and to pay travel expenses and accommodation for workers who live outside the train routes."

The drivers were called back to work and services resumed August 17.

Panamanian medical specialists meet to decide on strike

Following the government's approval of \$5 million for the purchase of supplies and medicine, medical specialists at the Santo Tomás Hospital (HST) in Panama City called off their planned strike. Nonetheless, the HST Medical Specialists Association resolved to meet in a general assembly August 23 to make a final decision.

The specialists, first of all, are going to ask where the funds are going to come from. Secondly, the government's promise of the supplies and medicine only extends to December 31, generating uncertainty as to whether the specialists will have to resort once again to protests and strikes to obtain supplies and medicines in 2017.

Guyanese mineworkers protest foot-dragging on wage talks

Workers for the Guyanese bauxite mining firm Bosai picketed its main compound August 18 to demand movement on negotiations over their wages. Negotiations began in April, and management has refused to budge from its 4.5 percent raise offer. The workers want no less than 9 percent.

The workers were particularly incensed when they found out that the general manager would be leaving Guyana to enjoy a month-long vacation as talks remained stalled. Last year, the workers' union, the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE), settled for 6.5 percent following a year of stalling by

management and strikes and protests by workers.

Workers' other issues include vacation pay, overtime, benefits and security. They also complained about having to ride on hot dusty roads in buses without air conditioning, the use of a faulty pickup truck for transporting injured workers for lack of an ambulance, and poor lighting when they worked in the pit.

NAACIE representative Linnell Warden met with Bosai management following the protest and later emerged to announce, "The negotiation is ongoing. We continue to reach on a weekly basis as per normal and to move forward with the negotiations to see how fast we can wrap it up." Regarding the ambulance issue, he indicated that the pickup truck would be replaced by a bus.

Argentine teachers strike for 48 hours

Teachers in Argentina's Entre Rios province stopped work on August 18 and 19 to demand salary adjustments in response to the nation's galloping inflation. The strike decision was voted on at the latest Extraordinary Congress of the Educators Union Association (AGMER).

An AGMER statement claimed a participation rate of 90 percent for both days, saying that it "shows that the teachers in the province will not be pressured nor intimidated by the threats of docking launched by the provincial government." Striking teachers also engaged in actions like "demonstrations, leafleting, assemblies and public classes, among others," according to the statement.

The statement called on AGMER members to join the nationwide teachers strike called by the CTERA teachers confederation for August 24 (see below). The main demands of the national action are: reopening of national parity talks; a wage raise; fulfillment of already-agreed parity accords; continuation of national "socio-educational" programs, which have been cut or threatened recently; rejection of the "earnings tax" on higher-paid workers; no changes to retirement programs; and the raising of funding for education to 10 percent of gross domestic product.

National strike call by Argentine teachers federation

On August 18, the Confederation of Education Workers of the Republic of Argentina (CTERA) issued a national strike call for August 24. CTERA also resolved to join the "Marcha Federal" from August 31 to September 2 convoked by the Argentine Workers Central (CTA) and other union organizations.

CTERA also announced September 21 as a National Day against Impunity as part of the Fuentealba II cause. The anti-impunity project is named after Carlos Fuentealba, a teacher who was killed during a union protest in Neuquén province in April 2007.

Uruguayan health workers strike for 24 hours to protest government policies

Public health workers in Uruguay stopped work on August 18 and held protests and marches against government policies. Among the policies that the protesters denounced were the increasing use of contract workers, shortages of personnel and inefficient use of resources.

The director of a public hospital said that each nurse there was responsible for 20 patients, while at private health institutions the number of nurses has been cut in half.

“Private hospital workers are mobilizing too. They delivered a letter to Uruguay’s president, Tabaré Vázquez, demanding, among other things, unfulfilled agreements and they will carry out a 24-hour strike in the next few days,” according to a hispantv.com report.

24-hour strike by doctors in Dominican Republic

Public hospital doctors in the Dominican Medical College (CMD), the main union in the Dominican Republic’s National Pact for Health, walked off the job on August 18. Emergencies and critical cases were attended to, while pediatrics, gynecology and obstetrics, gastroenterology, cardiology, internal medicine, diabetology shut down.

Adherence to the strike was high, reportedly 100 percent at some hospitals. CMD head Waldo Ariel Suero belied government claims that the doctors were “cornered and alone,” and deplored conditions at public hospitals, especially the lack of medicine. The CMD is demanding a 60 percent pay raise, more personnel in hospitals and the earmarking of 5 percent of the gross domestic product to the health sector.

New negotiations in West Virginia lockout

Union representatives for the United Steelworkers (USW) met earlier this month with negotiators for the glass manufacturer EuropTec in Clarksburg, West Virginia, in an effort to end a lockout. The 29 workers have been locked out since July 11 and without a contract since October of 2015. The company is currently operating with replacement workers.

EuropTec has been manufacturing touchscreen glass since 2006. In a company statement it said it had invested “millions of dollars” in the Clarksburg facility and had to “compete with other high tech manufacturers around the world. ... We would prefer to move forward together with the Union, and continue to hope that further negotiations will bring that about. But, the way things now stand we believe that operating without the Union is our best option for servicing our customers.”

Another strike to hit Pennsylvania hospital

Nurses at Heritage Valley Beaver in Pennsylvania voted down the most recent contract offer and are slated to walk out August 23. Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) still object to hospital management’s demands that nurses shoulder a greater portion of health care costs.

The previous contract covering nurses expired on June 30 and the SEIU called a limited strike in July, but management held firm in its position.

Health care workers protest concession demands by San Francisco-based health care system

Some 100 health care workers carried out a protest picket August 3 in front of St. John’s Regional Medical Center in Oxnard, California to call attention to wage and benefit issues in current contract negotiations. The workers, members of Service Employees International Union, charge that Dignity Health, which owns the facility, is trying to slash pensions and freeze wages.

Dignity is attempting to assuage workers’ anger with the offer of a 1 percent bonus in an effort to get the concessions through. Health care workers at Dignity Health’s St. John’s Pleasant Valley Hospital in Camarillo, California held a similar picket one day earlier.

Quebec school workers strike

Seven workers at 16 CEGEPs, which are provincially run colleges in Quebec, staged a half-day strike on Monday after working without a contract since March of last year.

The workers, members of Syndicat de professionnelles et professionnels du gouvernement du Québec (SPGQ), include administrators, counsellors, librarians and other non-teaching staff at CEGEPs across the province of Quebec, including some in the Montreal area.

According to the union, low wages and poor working conditions have made it difficult to retain staff at the schools and this action is being taken as a pressure tactic to wrest a new contract from the government. More strike actions are planned for the fall, along with a meeting with the Higher Education Minister that is scheduled to take place in September.

Halifax outside workers facing lockout

Over 300 outside city workers voted to reject the latest contract offer from the City of Halifax, Nova Scotia, even after being threatened with lockout on August 9 by city negotiators.

The workers, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), voted 90 percent against a four-year deal that included concession demands, particularly on pensions, but also for work hours and seniority provisions. According to the union, the lockout threat actually pushed its members into rejecting the proposed contract.

Negotiations conciliated by the province are ongoing under the lockout threat and the city has refused to rule out the use of replacement workers in the event of a work stoppage.



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