

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 September 2016

Argentine bus drivers strike over worker's death

Bus drivers for Buenos Aires' Line 60 stopped work on September 9 following the death of an electrical maintenance worker at a depot workshop. The worker, David Ramallo, was performing electrical maintenance on a bus when a mechanical jack he was using failed, causing the bus to fall on him. The 35-year-old father of three suffered severe injuries from which he later succumbed at a local hospital.

Workers blame Line 60 operator DOTA, which is owned by Microómnibus Norte, for the tragedy. "Since the DOTA group moved the depot to the new terminal in the Barracas neighborhood, we workers have been complaining that the pneumatic lifts didn't comply with minimum safety guarantees," a press release stated. The statement added that management had ignored their complaints, and "the conditions to continue working do not exist."

Workers accused DOTA of trying to create an incident by sending a provocateur to withdraw a bus from the depot. "The idea is to blame the workers for the lack of the vehicle," a worker told reporters.

As of September 10, neither the Labor Ministry nor the Workplace Risk Supervisory administration had responded to the workers' demand for an investigation.

Strikes by Chilean mineworkers over wages, labor and living conditions

Strikes at two Chilean mines took place last week. On September 5, workers at the Potrerillos de El Salvador copper mine, located in the northern Atacama region, walked out when management refused to raise their wages, instead offering a one-time bonus of 2 million pesos (US\$2,977). The workers set up blockades at some roads.

Negotiations continued during the strike. On September 9, the parties announced the acceptance by union reps of a company proposal. The union's president, Patricio Elgueta,

claimed "some improvements in the clauses that the company had put, the extension of the collective agreement from 24 to 26 months, the incorporation of personnel who were not involved in the negotiations, who are of indefinite term."

At the Los Bronces copper mine, also in the Atacama region, mineworkers voted 858 to 508 in favor of strike action after rejecting management's latest offer September 8. The next day, they downed their tools. The total workforce at Los Bronces is 1,725.

Los Bronces, located at high altitude and subject to extreme weather, was taken over by South Africa-based Anglo American—one of the world's largest mining conglomerates—in 1980 and has never had a strike since then. Last year, the complex to which it belongs produced 437,800 tons of copper. The company, pleading economic difficulties, refuses to budge on granting wage raises, instead offering a one-time bonus of 9 million pesos (US\$13,600) and an interest-free loan of 3 million pesos (US\$4,500).

Another issue that the company is not addressing is that of habitability. Union president Eduardo Rocco has accused the company of renegeing on promises to build an encampment "that would have a standard similar to what they have taken out, which was a hotel that had all the elements inside a closed space." Instead, "They switched us to a sector in which everything is separated by distances of 500 meters to a kilometer. There's a decline in workers' labor conditions, especially in their rest periods."

Rocco claimed that Anglo American had promised to spend US\$50 million on the hotel but did not despite extracting US\$1.716 billion between 2012 and 2015. The union says that the firm "has to give stronger signals in terms of the miners' quality of life" before the strike is called off.

Brazilian bank employees strike for better salaries, benefits, working conditions

Public and private bank workers walked off the job on

September 7 in 21 of Brazil's 27 states. The striking workers rejected the bank management federation Fenaban's offer of 6.5 percent, less than half of the 14.78 percent demanded by the 512,000-member National Financial Branch Workers Confederation (Contraf), and a one-time payment of 3,000 reais (US\$916). Contraf accuses Fenaban of not factoring in inflation for the last twelve months, which reached 9.75 percent.

The workers also want a greater part of profit sharing, pointing out that the five major Brazilian banks made 29.7 billion reais (US\$9.11 billion) in the first half of the year, while they cut 7,897 jobs. "The disposition of the banks is to take and take, increase their benefits over the stressful work of the employees," a Contraf statement accused.

Bank workers are also calling for an end to "abusive goals, moral and sexual harassment and outsourcing."

Jamaican cabbies and bus drivers strike against poor road conditions

Taxi and bus drivers in St. Thomas parish in southeastern Jamaica withdrew their services on September 5 due to the poor condition of the Amity Hall main road. They also stopped driving the road between Port Antonio and Morant Bay. Later that day, cabbies and bus drivers in the northeastern parish of Portland joined the protest actions.

Along some stretches, protesting drivers chopped down trees to block the road. Schools in the area were closed as children had no way to get to class. On September 9, Lynvale Bloomfield, a member of parliament, visited one of the protest sites, but was told by the drivers that the protests would continue until the roads were improved. Another MP, Fenton Ferguson, said that there has been "a lack of equity" in the patching of roads in the parish.

"Taxi operators, who ply the route between Yallahs to Port Antonio, say the road has been in a state of disrepair for several years, hence the need for action," reported rjrnewsonline.com.

Negotiations fail to resolve Yuba City, California teachers' strike

A weekend bargaining session seeking to end a strike by 700 teachers in Yuba City, California, broke off early on September 11 without an agreement. Teachers, who voted

by a 95 percent margin to strike, are demanding a 13 percent pay increase and claim that the 9.6 percent pay increase offered by the school district is "highly misleading," saying it amounts to only four percent over three years.

Teachers are holding strong to their demand, pointing to the fact that Yuba City teachers make 13 percent less than the average California teacher. When Yuba City teachers are compared to nearby Sacramento teachers, they make 33 percent less.

The Yuba City Unified school district is paying strikebreakers double the salaries of striking teachers in an effort to maintain classes for 13,300 students at 18 schools. Many students, however, have skipped class to join striking teachers on the picket line. One student told Fox40 TV "it was the best experience... I got to learn about what's going on."

Hotel strikes expand across Quebec

At least 23 hotels across the province of Quebec saw workers on strike this week, with a number of others poised for similar action as contract talks have hit an impasse.

While some hotel workers, who are also represented by the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), last week adopted a new contract that included some wage gains and minimal improvements in pensions and severance pay, hundreds more engaged in a three-day strike to increase pressure for a new settlement.

Though most of the hotels affected are in the Montreal area, a number in Quebec City and the Eastern Townships south of Montreal have also been affected by job action. Unions say their demands are justified in light of a hike in profits for the tourist industry after an exceptionally busy season due largely to the low Canadian dollar.



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