

Workers Struggles: the Americas

20 September 2016

Latin America

Argentine airline pilots hold short strike for salary raise

Pilots for Aerolíneas Argentinas and its sister company, Austral, held a 16-hour strike beginning at 8:00 PM September 15 following fruitless “obligatory conciliation” talks between the Aerolíneas Aéreas Pilots Association (APLA) and the airlines. According to an APLA communiqué, the arbitration talks, which had been ordered by the Labor Ministry, passed their deadline without agreement on a raise that would keep up with inflation.

APLA, which was joined in the walkout by the Airline Aviators Union (UALA), accused the airlines of having “maintained an unusual intransigence” and of delaying resolution of the issue.

Several unions have reached agreements for raises of between 27 and 36 percent this year, but according to the nation’s Central Bank, Argentina’s inflation rate—which is chronically underestimated—will reach 43 percent this year, after climbing to 43.5 percent last year.

At noon on September 16, the pilots went back to work without attaining the raise.

Buenos Aires bus line resumes partial service after strike brought on by worker’s death

Workers for the Buenos Aires Line 60 bus route returned to work on September 16 following an agreement signed with management to improve workplace safety. The workers had walked off the job (13 September Workers Struggles) on September 9 after a mechanical jack failed and a bus fell on electrical maintenance worker David Ramallo, who later died from his injuries at a hospital. The depot where he was working had been the subject of numerous safety complaints, which were ignored by DOTA, the line operator.

Workers rejected the company’s claim that the death of the 35-year-old father of three was the result of “human errors,” but asserted that it was from “previously reported technical flaws.” According to the agreement, representatives from the Labor Ministry, the National Transport Regulation Commission, DOTA and the workers’ union were to meet at noon at the depot workshop where Ramallo was fatally injured to inspect the area.

However, DOTA reps waited until 5:00 PM, when the depot’s safety verification areas were closed, before showing up. A union delegate called the delay “a clear dirty trick” on the part of management. The union reps said that workers would not use unsafe ramps or dubious equipment, but that negotiations would continue. Workshops remained closed and bus service was partially restored.

Chilean mineworkers end strike over wages, living conditions

Workers at the Los Bronces copper mine, located in Chile’s high-altitude Atacama region, returned to work September 16 after their two unions agreed to accept mining conglomerate Anglo American’s offer. The unions for the 1,700-strong workforce had demanded wage raises as opposed to the firm’s offer of a one-time bonus and interest-free loan but with no raise. An additional demand was improved habitations for workers living and working in the extreme climatic conditions. (13 September Workers Struggles)

Los Bronces president Hennie Faul claimed that the contract that the unions accepted was the same as the company’s offer that had been rejected in an 858 to 508 strike vote on September 8, but with a monthly raise of 140,000 pesos (US\$207) to be added to September’s payroll. The contract will be in effect until 2020.

Faul also claimed that there would be no retaliation against miners for alleged violence committed during the strike. Neither he nor media coverage made any mention of the demands regarding living conditions.

Uruguayan workers march for higher wages, education spending

Tens of thousands of workers from various sectors, particularly teaching and health care, marched and rallied in Montevideo on September 15 to demand better pay and a higher budget for education. The mobilization was called by the PIT-CNT, Uruguay’s largest labor federation. Some teachers’ unions struck for the whole day.

Workers took off four hours, 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM, in a partial strike to participate in the march, which began at the University of the Republic and ended at the Legislative Palace. In addition to calling for wage raises and education spending, PIT-CNT officials voiced support for Brazil’s ex-president Dilma Rousseff, denouncing her recent impeachment as a coup.

Other demands were for improvements in the National Integrated Health System and the end of the “mixed” pension system that divides retirement contributions between private and public funds.

Jamaican water supply workers strike over unresolved contract issues

Workers for Jamaica’s National Water Commission (NWC) walked off the job September 13 to protest the lack of resolution of various issues under discussion in contract talks. NWC management is currently in negotiations with the Jamaica Association of Local Government Officers, Bustamante Industrial Trade Union, the National Workers Union (NWU) and the Union of Private and Public Employees.

The four unions’ representatives had agreed to continue holding meetings at the Labour Ministry despite the strike action. In fact, an NWU

official claimed that the unions had planned to put the strike on hold pending the meeting's outcome, but that the message was not conveyed to all the unions. Some striking workers padlocked the entrances to several NWU branch offices.

Issues still on the table include improvements in fringe benefits such as meal and footwear allowances, loans, productivity incentives, height and depth pay, and discomfiture/hazard allowance.

By September 14, following an "emergency conciliation meeting," an agreement had been reached that, apart from the loan scheme and productivity incentive policies, did not resolve the issues, but stated that management would review the other items in question. Workers were told to return to the job.

The United States

New negotiations in Pennsylvania candy strike

Union negotiators and officials representing the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania candy-maker Just Born Inc. will return to the negotiating table starting September 27. But the company has pressed ahead with plans to bring in replacement workers since 400 members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union struck the plant on September 7.

While wages and increased healthcare costs for workers are disputed, employees are particularly upset over what they claim is a company strategy to dismantle their defined benefit pension plan. Management says it only wants to put all future employees on an inferior 401(k) plan.

Management says it has received 175 applications at a recent jobs fair and another 600 have applied online. The company and union disagree on the number of workers who have crossed picket lines. The union claims 20 and management insists it is higher. "It's a growing number, and it will continue to grow," said a company spokesman.

Low pay and poor working conditions heat up contract battle in air cargo industry

Pilots for Atlas Air Worldwide Holdings (AAWH) picketed the corporate headquarters in Purchase, New York, September 9, to protest substandard pay and working conditions. The date also marked the point at which the contract between AAWH and the Teamsters union becomes amenable.

The picket is only a part of a complex intersection of negotiations with air cargo companies that predominantly provide services across the United States for the German-based company DHL. AAWH owns three airlines that fly for DHL. Another two companies, ABX and Kalitta Air also provide DHL with cargo service and, together, some 2,000 pilots at all five airlines voted by a 99 percent margin to strike back in May.

Federal law under the Railway Labor Act prevents pilots from striking until after a cooling off period. A strike would be devastating to DHL as the five cargo airlines provide 70 percent of its global transport servicing. Pilots are universally angry over the fact that they make inferior pay and work longer hours than their counterparts at UPS and FedEx.

One of the strategies being employed by AAWH is the acquisition of Southern Air, which went through bankruptcy in 2012 and had a deeply concessionary contract imposed on its pilots. AAWH is now seeking to further undermine AAWH pilots by merging the inferior contract conditions of Southern Air into the contract of its current pilots.

The Teamsters union sees the current negotiations as critical given its position representing UPS pilots, and is looking for an accommodation and partnership with the companies. A statement said in part, "Pilots have sacrificed to help DHL contracted airlines succeed. We are helping DHL grow its business in the United States and building profits for all

companies involved."

Canada

Ontario union battles union employer

At least 22 workers employed by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) have taken limited job action in recent days in an increasingly bitter fight developing between the union and its own workers.

According to reports, at least four workers have been fired and five more suspended. OPSEU has accused a total of 22 workers of taking illegal job action, including a protest march during their coffee break, in defense of a suspended co-worker. Union staff are represented by the Ontario Public Service Staff Union (OPSSU), which just recently signed a new collective agreement, but the two unions are at loggerheads over numerous accusations by workers against their employer over what has been described as a toxic work environment.

Over 350 workers are employed by OPSEU, which represents 130,000 public servants across Ontario.

Toronto area child protection workers to strike

Workers at the Children's Aid Society (CAS) in Peel Region north of Toronto are set to go on strike this week with the employer threatening to immediately bring in replacement workers. The 435 workers at CAS, a government funded NGO, are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been working without a contract since the end of March. Mediated talks broke off last week after the union rejected what the CAS called is final offer.

The CAS provides child protection and other vital services for society's most vulnerable and its management has offered assurances that contingency plans are in place in the event of a strike.

Saskatchewan bus drivers give strike notice

Bus drivers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan are set to take job action up to and including a strike this week after issuing a 48-hour strike notice last Friday.

Even though bus drivers have been working without a contract since 2012, negotiators for the Amalgamated Transit Workers Union (ATU) say that they will not begin job action with an all-out strike, but rather start with slowdowns and overtime bans and escalate from there.

Wages and pensions are the main issues in dispute, although the union acknowledges some improvement in wage offers in recent days. The ATU is the last of nine unions contracted to the City of Saskatoon to agree to a new four-year deal.



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