

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 October 2016

Argentine pilots, ground crews strike over contract and salary demands

Pilots at two airports serving the Buenos Aires region, Metropolitan Aeropark and Ezeiza Airport, stopped work at 10 p.m., October 12, to protest noncompliance by Chile-based LATAM Airlines Group with contract provisions. The pilots' unions, UPSA and APA, called the walkout to protest the failure of talks that had convened on September 30.

The pilots' unions are demanding a 45 percent raise to compensate for the devastation that inflation has brought to purchasing power, while LATAM has not budged from its 35 percent. The unions have also complained that the firm has not followed through on some contract provisions, has canceled vacations, cut personnel and has not negotiated seriously in tripartite talks at the Labor Ministry.

LATAM quickly applied for and obtained a back-to-work order and "obligatory conciliation" decree from the ministry. The unions complied, with pilots returning to work by midmorning. The negotiations have a 15-day deadline for coming to an agreement.

Two-day national strike by Argentine professors over salary demands

University professors in a number of unions held a two-day strike October 13 and 14 to press their demand for a 15 percent salary raise. The Conadu, Conadu Histórica and Fedun federations, as well as the UDA and Ctera preuniversity unions participated following the Education Ministry's rejection of the reopening of parity talks.

The unions claimed "high observance" of the strike call, and on all national university campuses striking professors held open classes, assemblies and radio interviews, and passed out fliers. The federations also voiced support for a strike planned for October 19 to protest femicide. Human rights organizations say that murders of women have surged in recent months.

Conadu Histórica resolved to hold another 48-hour strike on October 27 and 28 if there is no movement on their demand.

Salvadoran hospital workers strike to protest salary scale policy

Workers in El Salvador's hospitals began a strike October 13 against the government's application of a salary scale adjustment. The workers' union objected to the government giving the raise only to those who make less than US\$1,500 per month, i.e., about 82 percent of the 24,000 public health workers.

At the Benjamin Bloom Children's Hospital in San Salvador, the hospital workers' union, SITHBLOOM, called for, according to its secretary of conflict Álex Carballo, "a reduction of labors to the national

level," thus avoiding a full strike, which is illegal for public workers in the country. Nonetheless, the San Salvador labor court ruled the action a strike and demanded that the workers return to their usual pace.

Emergency and other essential services were not struck, though authorities at some locations claimed that the workers were blocking ambulances, a claim that they denied. In some hospitals, like the San Pedro facility in Usulután, activists from the FMLN attempted to cause incidents in order to discredit the protesting workers.

On October 14, health workers' union representatives met with the health minister and a human rights attorney, but were unable to reach an agreement. The minister would not promise that no retaliation would be carried out against the workers, saying that was at the discretion of hospital administrators. After the end of the meeting, union reps said they would go to their bases to determine what to do next.

Mexican taxi drivers protest Uber

Several hundred taxi drivers from various Mexican states protested against the Uber and Cabify ride services in Mexico City on October 12. Assembling at the traffic circle surrounding the Angel of Independence monument, the protesting cabbies blocked traffic with their vehicles for several hours before state police reopened one side of the boulevard.

There were some cases of taxi drivers pushing and rocking cars of suspected Uber drivers, but no injuries were reported. Police "encapsulated" about 100 protesting drivers who attempted to block one section of the roundabout.

The taxi drivers' association plans to appeal to the governorship to ban Uber and other similar services in the capital. Cabbies complain that the comparatively unregulated businesses are unfair competition and are unconstitutional.

Mexican salt fields union delays strike, continues negotiations over wages, job cuts

Workers at the Exportadora de Sal salt works in Guerrero Negro, Baja California Sur, Mexico continued working as the deadline for a strike passed on October 11. Their union had threatened industrial action if the firm, the largest salt exporter in the world with nearly 8 million tons per year, did not agree to its demand of a 15 percent raise. The company has held firm to its 0.5 percent offer.

Workers claim that the business is trying to thin out the workforce, currently at about 1,300 people, and weaken the contract in order to sell it to the Japanese company Mitsubishi. According to the workers, Mitsubishi, its biggest customer, buys the salt at a preferential price and resells it for three times its cost.

Exportadora obtained a two-month extension of negotiations in which

the Federal Arbitration and Conciliation Board will participate. It has already cut the unionized workforce by 25 to 30 percent.

Belizean teachers continue strike over good governance, pay, labor demands

Teachers in Belize have been on a national strike since October 5, when they walked out to demand a 3 percent pay raise, improved labor conditions and the institution of “good governance” measures. On October 13, negotiators for the Belize National Teachers Union (BNTU) met with Prime Minister Dean Barrow to discuss the issues.

The BNTU has been calling for the establishment of a number of committees that it claims will enhance good governance and transparency: the appointment of a Senate Select Committee on education; investigation of a murder case in which government officials were implicated; revival of cost-saving and revenue enhancement committees; an Integrity Commission, among others.

Barrow agreed to some of the proposals, and made some promises regarding social security, but opposed a BNTU proposal to properly compensate teachers and support staff at grant-aided schools. As for the meager 3 percent raise, he held firm to his resolve to delay its implementation.

The BNTU announced that it would continue the strike until at least October 19, when teachers will hold a protest demonstration.

Jamaican bauxite and aluminum workers protest lack of wage deal

Several hundred production workers at the WINDALCO bauxite and alumina production complex in St. Catherine, Jamaica, held a brief protest outside the company on October 12 during their lunch break. The workers protested delays in getting a wage deal and the lack of improvement in what a union official called “deplorable” working conditions.

The company has held several meetings with the Union of Clerical, Administrative and Supervisory Employees (UCASE), but has yet to make an offer to workers.

Trinidad and Tobago: Oilfield retirees picket union headquarters

As several hundred members of the Oilfields Workers Trade Union (OWTU) protested at the Brian Lara Promenade in Port of Spain, Trinidad, to demand that the government settle all outstanding wage negotiations for the period 2011-2014, about 40 OWTU retirees held a protest of their own outside the union’s headquarters in San Fernando.

The retirees are former employees of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission (TTEC) who are frustrated “about the union’s inability to bring pressure to bear on TTEC to align their pension payments to the collective agreement,” according to a Newsday report.

A retirees’ representative told reporters that they were supposed to receive additional money following the signing of the 2006-2010 T&TEC-OWTU collective agreement, but that “right now, retirees are living on the 2003 pension.” Each retiree was supposed to have received back pay of about 26,500 Trinidadian dollars (US\$3,952), but most have not received any while a few received a fraction.

Chicago charter school teachers threaten walkout

In a near-unanimous vote, some 532 teachers at the UNO Charter School Network voted last week for strike action as early as October 19. This would be the first-ever strike of charter schools in the US. The issues include limits on class sizes and concessions demands by management.

The UNO charter school system manages 16 schools in Chicago, many of which serve Hispanic and minority neighborhoods. Teachers are protesting plans by management to implement further cuts after a wave of layoffs last August.

Dozens of teachers and supporters marched outside the UNO offices last Thursday. The teachers are organized by the United Educators of UNO union (UEU).

UEU spokeswoman Erica Stewart, a fifth-grade teacher who is on the bargaining committee, said, “Our members have overwhelmingly voted to send a strong message to management that they need to step up and do the right thing for our kids and our schools. Now it’s management’s turn to show their dedication to the employees they claim to value—and the students whose lives are in their hands.”

Support workers set to strike in Windsor

Three hundred seventy support workers employed by the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board are set to go on strike this week after working without a contract since August of 2014.

There are two bargaining units of Unifor affected by the job action that represents office workers, technicians, custodians and maintenance staff at over 40 elementary and secondary schools in the district. Wages for these workers have been frozen since 2012 even though the contract that was imposed by government on schools at the time was declared unconstitutional. The school board has continued to restrict the right to strike and removed access to benefits for those about to retire.

The school board has announced that schools will remain open in the event of a strike and the union has warned that repair and cleaning of buildings will be suspended along with community use of schools during the strike.

Northern Ontario city workers move to strike

Inside and outside workers employed by the Township of Black River-Matheson near Timmins in northern Ontario could be on strike as early as Monday of next week after rejecting the “final offer” their employer was trying to impose and voting unanimously in favor of strike action.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) whose negotiators say they are only seeking to maintain what they call very modest benefits in a new contract. Workers have been without a contract since March of this year and have been in a legal strike position since September 10.



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