Venezuelan bus drivers protest shortages, census

Workers Struggles: the Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

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Bus drivers held a demonstration in front of Venezuela's Ministry of Transport building in Caracas, Venezuela August 3 to protest shortages of supplies and parts. Some of them came in their vehicles, forming a caravan. Later, a delegation took a document inside to deliver to the Transport Minister.

The protesting drivers listed shortages of lack of oil, tires, batteries and replacement parts among the items that they cannot get, a situation that protest organizers claimed has accounted for less than 10 percent of buses in the capital, and 30 percent nationwide, being in operation. They also denounced the government's allowance of the use of flatbed trucks to transport people.

Another aspect of the protest was a denunciation of a census being carried out in the nation's 355 municipalities by the government, which asserts that it will help to regulate the distribution and consumption of gasoline. The protesters retort that they have already held several censuses and, as one protest spokesperson put it, "The solution to this problem is not the census, it's supplies."

Argentine volunteer firefighters protest budget cuts

Hundreds of volunteer firefighters and citizens converged on Argentina's Congress building in Buenos Aires on August 2 to protest cuts to the nation's 900 fire stations. Similar protests were held in other cities.

The cuts by the right wing Cambiemos administration have severely affected training, insurance coverage and operability of the firefighting corps. The 2017-18 national budgets have slashed 40 percent of funding, amounting to 614 million pesos (US$22.5 million), from the National Firefighters System, at a time when fires are increasingly plaguing nations worldwide.

Dressed in their helmets and protective clothing, the firefighters attempted to hold a symbolic embrace at the Legislative Palace, but were prevented by Federal Police, causing moments of tension.

Chilean copper mineworkers vote to strike over pay, conditions

Workers at Chile's Escondida copper mine voted August 2 to reject the BHP affiliate's latest offer. Out of 2,500 members of the N1 union, 2,330 voted, and they nixed the company proposal by 84 percent. In accordance with Chilean labor law, the strike will not take effect for four days if one party solicits mediation. BHP has announced that it has contingency plans in place.

Management had offered a 1.5 percent raise and a 15 million-peso (US$23,000) conflict termination bonus. N1's demands included a 5 percent raise and a conflict termination bonus of four percent of dividends received by shareholders in 2017, 34 million pesos (US$34,000). Current monthly pay at Escondida ranges from 1.6 million to 1.9 million pesos (US$2,500-3,000).

Workers cite their environment and harsh living and working conditions as justification for their demands. The mine, the world's largest—and one of the most profitable—is located in Chile's arid high-altitude Atacama Desert where extreme weather is the norm.

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Last year, a strike at Escondida lasted for 44 days before the N1 called it off without any of its demands being met. Despite lamentations by the company and media that the strike had damaged the company and the national economy, BHP pulled in nearly US$1.2 billion, a 20 percent increase over 2016.

Lockout at Montana plant

Workers at the Imerys Talc plant in Three Forks, Montana were locked out August 3 after workers voted 27-7 to reject the company's final offer. Members of Boilermakers Local D-239 previously rejected contracts by 39-0 and 37-0 votes, leading the company to issue an ultimatum to accept concessions or be locked out.

Imerys is demanding an end to retiree health benefits, freezing pensions, and radically tearing up work rules that govern seniority, job classifications, overtime and layoff recall provisions. The union has been in negotiations since May and the old agreement expired in June.

"This is the most disgusting company I have ever worked for. They are so unethical, liars and greed. Nothing but greed," Denny Delaittre, who has 22 years seniority, told MTN News. "We were kicked out of our jobs, not our choice. We want to work, we tried to work but they won't let us cross. We have families to support."

Imerys has 16,000 employees and has operations that extract minerals in 50 different countries.

Boston sheet metal workers on strike

About 1,400 Sheet Metal Workers in the Boston area went on strike August 1 demanding a better pay package. According to Sheet Metal & Air Conditioning Contractors' Association, which represents some 30 companies, the union rejected a $10 an hour pay package over the course of a three-year contract proposal.

Sheet Metal Workers Union Local 17 takes the pay package and divides the sum between wages and benefits. The union is also calling for overtime pay to be raised to double-time and the pay level for apprentices increased, indicating the newest workers suffer a much lower level in pay.

The labor union has negotiated no-strike clauses for sheet metal work on some job sites such as the Encore Boston Harbor casino in Everett, Massachusetts. But since the fabrication of units are done by facilities that are now out on strike, it is possible those job sites will be forced to shut down.

Toronto stage technicians locked out

Members of the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 58 demonstrated in front of Toronto City Hall last week to demand that the municipality return to the bargaining table. About 450 stagehands have been locked out since July 20 by the Board of Governors at Exhibition Place, one of Toronto's main convention, entertainment and sports complexes. The Board is comprised of city councillors and hand-picked individuals from business and community organizations who have demanded that the IATSE members surrender long-standing job security protections against contracting out. Toronto's right-wing mayor, John Tory, has refused to meet with the stagehands to discuss the lockout.

Since the beginning of the lockout, the Board has instructed the various businesses that operate inside Exhibition Place to provide their own workforce for various events scheduled, which have included Major League Soccer and Canadian Football League games, the giant Caribana West Indian cultural festival as well as trade shows and conventions. As a result, scab labour has been performing the work of the locked-out stagehands throughout the complex.

In two weeks, the Canadian National Exhibition opens in Toronto—the city's signature end-of-summer event that attracts over a million visitors each year. Signalling that they expect a lengthy dispute, the Board of Governors for Exhibition Place had asked the union to suspend picketing until after the event closes on Labour Day but the stagehands have refused.

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