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Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

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A strike by Costa Rica public employees is now entering its fourth week. On Sunday most public employee unions rejected an agreement between the union bureaucracy and the Costa Rican government and called for the continuation of the strike.

Reacting to the union position, the government has now called on the Catholic Church to reach out to those unions that would be willing to form a new negotiating team.

At issue is the government's economic austerity program that threatens jobs and living conditions of public employees. It is expected that the austerity measure (the Public Finance Act) will be approved by the national legislature in its first debating session in October.

Labor Minister Steven Nuñez indicated that if no union comes to the table, the government would take the necessary "administrative" measures to declare the strike illegal, and force public employees back to work.

Mexican Pilots vote to strike this week

On Friday, September 28, assembled Aeromexico pilots in Mexico City declared themselves on strike beginning this week after rejecting the airline's "last and best" offer of a three percent raise and minor improvements in benefits.

On Sunday, on the eve of the strike, leaders of the Mexican Pilots Union (ASPA), continued negotiating with Aeromexico airline managers in a last-ditch attempt to avert the strike. The pilots are demanding a modest wage increase of five percent, two percent higher than the rate of inflation.

Aeromexico's last offer of three percent just matched the inflation rate.

Four years ago, in 2014, ASPA pushed through a concessions contract to ensure the airline's profitability. A strike by 1,000 pilots is now set for October 3.

Rio de Janeiro transit workers walk out over unpaid wages

On September 25 and 26 transit workers walked off of their jobs, paralyzing eleven commuter lines in the city of Rio de Janeiro. At issue are months of unpaid wages. According to the president of Rio de Janeiro transit employees, Sebastião José, paychecks for workers in these lines are late by more than two hundred hours.

"After promising to bring wages up to date, most of the companies announced new delays, the 13th delay in pay. Our members do not want to continue to be enslaved," declared José.

The United States

California Sun Maid workers end strike over health care

Over 500 members of Teamsters Local 431 who work for the Sun-Maid Growers raisin factory in Fresno County, California returned to work after ratifying a new agreement September 25. The strike began when workers voted down an agreement August 12 that would end the company's previous commitment to pay 100 percent of health care coverage.

The original proposal was endorsed by the Teamsters union and according to reports it remained in the final agreement ratified last week. Sun-Maid attempted to obscure their concession demand by pointing to increases in wages

and pension contributions.

Two days after workers walked out, Sun-Maid president Harry Overly announced the plant had been re-opened with replacement workers. “Sun-Maid has the right processes and contingency plans in place to meet demand and maintain a responsible business practice,” said Overly.

Kentucky Bourbon workers return to work after two-week strike over sick leave benefit

More than 50 workers at the Kentucky Bourbon maker Four Roses are returning to work last week at facilities in Lawrenceburg and Cox’s Creek after a two-week strike over the company’s attempt to alter the sick leave policy for new hires. Workers walked out September 7 after voting 51-2 against a proposal that would grant new hires 10 sick days per year, but prohibit them from carrying them over and banking them for future use.

Instead, the company wanted new workers to rely on eligibility for short-term disability. New terms give workers a one-time option to either accept the short-term disability offer or retain the old policy.

While the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 10D and the Service Employees International Union claimed the strike was not over wages, workers were not in the dark about the fact that the Bourbon industry is booming with profits of \$8.5 billion in the past year and that Kentucky is responsible for 95 percent of world bourbon production.

Workers had wanted annual wage increases of between 40 and 50 cents while the final agreement averages an increase of between 30 and 50 cents. Four Roses, which is a subsidiary of the Japanese conglomerate Kirin Holdings, instead substituted a \$2,000 signing bonus and a first year bonus of \$1,500, which would shrink to an annual bonus of \$600 spread across a five-year agreement.

Canada

Alberta school support staff strike

One-hundred-twenty support staff employed at six Living Waters Catholic Schools in the towns of Whitecourt, Edson and Slave Lake west of Edmonton, Alberta are on strike this week following months of fruitless negotiations.

The striking workers include educational assistants, custodians and office staff who are members of the Alberta

Union of Public Employees (AUPE). With the employer demanding a wage freeze over the course of a four-year contract while increasing class sizes, union negotiators say they had no choice but to strike. They point out that wages are already so low that many of their members are forced to rely on food banks while working unstable hours.

While talks continue, Living Waters has insisted that schools remain open, though many parents are reportedly keeping their children home during the strike.

Québec liquor store workers extend strike mandate

After holding their fifth of six one-day strikes last weekend, workers at the Société des alcools du Québec (SAQ) voted to give their union, the Syndicat des employés de magasins et de bureaux de la SAQ, (SEMB SAQ) a mandate for a further 18 days of strike action in the coming months.

The union sought the mandate for when they “deem it necessary to put pressure on” after a “bargaining blitz” in recent weeks failed to produce an agreement for the 5,500 workers in over 400 outlets across the province. One of the central issues in protracted negotiations is the requirement to work weekends—which is when most of the one-day strikes have been held.

Workers at the SAQ have been working without a contract since March of this year and on each occasion voted almost unanimously in favor of strike action. The tactic of one-day strikes is a transparent effort on the part of the union bureaucracy to dissipate worker anger while limiting the impact to SAQ operations and revenue.



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