

Argentine teachers strike, Michigan road workers walk out, Blackjewell miners protest and BC forestry strike continues

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 August 2019

### **Mexican medical interns strike, march over grant payments, working conditions**

Members of the Assembly of Medical Social Service Interns of Mexico (AMMPSS) struck nationally and marched to the legislative palace in Mexico City on August 1 to present a petition to lawmakers. The main issue of the protests was reductions and nonpayment of grants, but the petition to the bicameral legislature also included demands for improved working conditions, standardization of pay scales, an end to delays in placements.

Bolstering illusions in the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), AMMPSS called for a federal plan to guarantee job security and dignified wages for the medical profession, and for the establishment of a specialized commission in the Senate and Congress that would include representatives of medical schools as well as Pan-American and world health organizations for “the planning, discussion and creation of a new model of social service in medicine and areas of health by means of a general law for the realization of social service in human resources.”

The document also demanded increased budgets for medical schools, the creation of a subsystem for specific attention to problems and guarantees of adequate medical supplies to clinics and hospitals.

### **Panamanian port strike over union representation ended after twelve days**

On the night of July 29, Panama’s Labor and Labor Development Ministry (Mitradel) announced the signing of an agreement between the SITRAVAAP port workers union and Panama Ports Company (PPC), ending a strike that had begun July 17.

PPC is a subsidiary of Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings, the world’s largest seaport company. Last year, PPC attempted to fire four workers for union activity and unilaterally changed pay scales in violation of the existing contract. SITRAVAAP took the case to court and won a judgment that the company had to negotiate, but PPC filed a motion for clarification

that has stalled in the Supreme Court; PPC claimed that it could not negotiate until a decision was reached on whether SITRAVAAP was legally recognized as the bargaining unit.

After months of demonstrations, petitions and short strike actions, workers walked off the job and set up pickets at the firm’s entrance. PPC asked for, and got, riot police to be deployed to harass the strikers while the government, media and Panama Maritime Chamber denounced the “illegal” and “unacceptable” strike, claiming that it was ruining Panama’s economy and reputation as a logistical hub.

Throughout the strike, negotiations continued. When Mitradel made the July 29 announcement, it claimed its role as mediator prevented it from releasing details of the pact.

### **Argentine teachers continue strike over salaries, conditions**

Close to 2,000 members of the Self-Organized Teachers of Salta, capital of the Argentine province of the same name, attended an assembly July 30 over the continuation of the strike they began on July 15 to demand improved wages and working conditions. After nearly six hours of debate, the teachers voted to continue the walkout.

Teachers engaged in a number of protests, marches and blockades in the two weeks before the vote. On July 24, several hundred teachers marched to the Ministry of Education to meet with ministry head Analía Berruezo, but instead were confronted by over 200 cops who attacked them. Some teachers were hospitalized after the police assault.

The assembly was called the day after a group of union delegates met with Berruezo, who told them that salary negotiations were closed and that Decree 1046, which established a 7.5 percent raise in July and was signed by the governor on July 29, could not be changed. The minister told delegates he was still open for discussion of labor conditions, but that beginning July 31 teachers would be docked for days on strike.

### **Tentative agreement brings Alaska ferry workers’ strike to an**

end

Negotiators for the Alaska Marine Highway System and the Inlandboatmen's Union of the Pacific reached a tentative agreement August 1 bringing the 10-day strike by 420 ferry workers to an end. Neither union nor state negotiators would reveal terms of the agreement that ended the walkout that paralyzed the system of 3,500 miles of routes that wind through the Aleutian Islands to British Columbia and down the Alaskan coastline to Washington state.

The strike, which came during the height of the transport season, cost the state of Alaska \$3.2 million in lost revenues. The 13 ferries provide the only transportation to countless communities with no connecting roads to the continent and provide critical access to produce, tourist travel, healthcare and other necessities.

The strike was supposedly over bread and butter contract issues, but they are affected by Alaskan Governor Michael Dunleavy's drive to slash of public services, including the ferries' Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS). The cuts are threatening to lay off half the ferry workers and eliminate service to many communities creating the conditions to privatize the AMHS system.

### **Michigan roadworkers strike**

More than 200 heavy-machine operators in Michigan who have been working without a contract since June 2018 walked off the job July 31 to oppose the subcontracting of jobs and to demand more than \$1.8 million in back pay and the ending of wage violations. The workers, who are members of Operating Engineers Local 324, struck against Indiana-based Rieth-Riley Construction Co., one of the largest road pavers and asphalt suppliers in Michigan, threatening the shutdown of the company's 90 road repair projects during the peak mid-summer season.

Last summer 2,000 road workers were locked out by employers for four weeks, halting 160 road projects commissioned by the Michigan Department of Transportation. Former governor Rick Snyder and the contractors' association outlined plans to use National Guardsmen to replace the locked-out workers. Less than 24 hours before the strikebreaking plan was put into motion, the union capitulated, signing a deal with nearly all 40 or so companies. Rieth-Riley was not a signatory to the deal. A spokesman for the union said that "members have stated they're (committed to the strike) for the long haul. Hopefully it won't go on much longer, but they have resolve."

### **Protest by Harlan County, Kentucky miners over back pay continues**

The protest by coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky is continuing with miners demanding that the bankrupt company Blackjewell pay them the wages they are owed. Last week, miners blocked a train loaded with coal from leaving the mine near Cumberland after their paychecks from the company bounced, causing severe economic hardships.

On Monday, miners and their families packed into a Charleston, West Virginia courtroom where a judge is overseeing the federal bankruptcy case. The miners and their families wore bright T-shirts that read, "Pay the miners first ... the lawyers last."

Fearful of spreading protests throughout the coalfields, where the energy giants have long used the bankruptcy courts and the collusion of the United Mine Workers to destroy the jobs, wages and pensions of miners, the Trump administration's Labor Department filed an emergency motion Monday saying the coal could not be moved until the miners are paid. Early last month, Blackjewell and its affiliates shut down operations after emergency financing fell through, leaving 1,800 miners in Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia and Wyoming unemployed and unpaid.

### **BC forestry workers strike passes one-month mark**

More than 3,000 forestry workers in British Columbia, employed by Western Forest Products, remain on strike more than a month after walking out July 1 when contract talks between the company and the United Steelworkers union broke down. Western is justifying its demand for major concessions in pensions and job security by pointing to a weaker market in the US, due to bad weather and slower than usual construction, which has led to a 50 percent decline in lumber prices over the last year.

While isolating the strike, officials from USW 1-1937, are parading officials from the New Democratic Party, including NDP Party Leader Jagmeet Singh, as saviors of the workers. Meanwhile workers at Island Forest Company, Big Lake Logging and Mount Slicker Timber will be voting Wednesday in Port Alberni on Vancouver Island to authorize a strike.



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