

Workers Struggles, the Americas

22 October 2013

Latin America

Brazilian oil workers strike for raise, against auction of oilfield exploration rights

Over 40,000 workers for Brazil's semi-public oil corporation Petrobras walked off the job on October 17 against the planned auction of exploration rights to a gigantic offshore oilfield. Workers downed their tools at twelve refineries, over 40 offshore platforms and various production facilities.

The workers are members of the FUP oil workers union federation. FUP called the strike to demand the suspension of an auction to take place on October 21, at which energy corporations from China, England, Holland, France and Spain would bid for exploration and production-sharing agreements over the Libra deepwater oilfield. FUP has filed legal action against the auction as well.

The Libra oilfield, which was discovered in 2010, is in the Santos basin, about 230 km (140 mi) off the coast of Rio de Janeiro. Estimates of recoverable volume "could vary from 3.7 billion to 15 billion barrels, with the most likely estimate being 7.9 billion barrels," according to a government report.

FUP is also demanding an 11.6 percent wage raise, as opposed to Petrobras's offer of 7.7 percent, and the end of plans to contract out services to private firms.

Demonstrations took place at Petrobras headquarters in Rio and outside government buildings in Brasilia, the capital. By October 18, oil production had slowed across Brazil, but had not halted, due to contingency plans by Petrobras, which included the use of teams of managers and supervisors. FUP claimed that two small oil spills had already occurred.

The government provided a large number of troops and police to guard the auction site and ensure the smooth operation of the sale.

Argentine cabin crews strike over contract violations

Flights from Argentina's Jorge Newbery Airport in Buenos Aires were canceled or delayed for a few hours on October 17 when cabin crews struck. The workers took the action to demand compliance with the contract signed between their union, the Argentine Cabin Crew Association (AAA), and management.

The main target of the strike was Aerolíneas Argentinas y Austral, which the union denounced because it "has systematically violated for three months the regulation rest periods, vacations, required staffing and stipulated limits...on the number of flight hours, and it flexibilizes our job duties."

AAA called on the company to respect the agreement and "reestablish dialogue" that had broken down.

At about 7:00 PM, about two hours after the strike began, the

Ministry of Labor decreed an "obligatory conciliation" meeting and ordered the workers to return to the job.

Partial strike by Chilean bus drivers over wages, working conditions

Some 1,500 public bus drivers in Santiago, Chile struck in the early morning of October 18. The strike against the Transantiago bus line affected more than a dozen routes in eight municipalities in the metropolitan area.

One union leader, Manuel Aguilar, told reporters that the stoppage was a protest against the "bad wages of the workers and bad working conditions...we want to vote on the collective agreement of 2012, because it promised us a lot, but in the end it is to the detriment of the workers."

Raises in particular that had been agreed to in the contract were never applied. Other complaints are the discomfort caused by the poor condition of the drivers' seats, which has caused health problems, and delays and confusion resulting from malfunctions of the "Bip" card system.

The drivers are asking for a tripartite meeting with the Labor Ministry mediating between the unions and management.

In anticipation of the strike, the Public Transport Directorate announced that it had a "special contingency plan, which brought this situation under control as rapidly as possible, with the objective of having the least impact on users of the system." Part of the plan was the dispatch of Carabineros, the national police, to terminals to "normalize" service. By midday, bus service had been reestablished.

Honduran doctors end 10-day strike over supplies, salaries

A strike of over 700 doctors from public hospitals and health centers in the Honduran capital Tegucigalpa that began on October 7 was ended on the 17th with the signing of an agreement between the Medical College of Honduras (CMH) and the government. In a general assembly, CMH members voted to suspend the strike and established October 31 as the deadline for the government to fulfill its promises.

The doctors walked out to demand the provision of supplies and medications, as well as the payment of overdue salaries to over one hundred doctors. Though consultations and elective surgeries were canceled, emergency services continued throughout. On October 14, the Labor Ministry (MT) declared the strike illegal and threatened suspensions and firings. Nonetheless, the strike continued, along with negotiations.

In addition to its promises to pay the salaries and provide the needed supplies and medicines, the MT says it will not carry out reprisals against the doctors. The CMH will hold a meeting before

the 31st to determine if the government has carried out the promises, and decide on further actions if it has not.

Mexican water workers' strike delayed by judicial ruling

A strike by workers at the Potable Water and Sewerage Directorate (DAPAS) in the Mexican state of San Luis Potosí was delayed due to the granting of an extension by a court ruling. The 5th District Court ruled on October 17 that the DAPAS Workers Union had not followed correct procedures, failing to call an assembly to determine if two-thirds of the members were in favor of the walkout. The court decision, which superseded a previous State Conciliation and Arbitration Board ruling, decreed an extension of 15 days before the union may call a strike.

During a recent tour of the state by the governor, a group of DAPAS workers handed him a copy of the strike call and denounced the harassment and asked the governor's intervention to "avoid a more serious conflict," reported El Sol de San Luis.

The report added: "There exists no confrontation between the union and the water operator," but that workers complained of "acts of pressure that the DAPAS director carries out against the workers, for which they ask that he be terminated and respect be granted for all unionized workers."

Even if the workers strike, they are hamstrung by the law, which forbids them from interfering with the flow of water to the population, and requires them to man three shifts a day. Nevertheless, the union has said that if DAPAS does not rectify the problems during the extension period, the strike will go ahead.

The United States

Longshoremens' union ends Port of Baltimore strike

A three-day strike by longshoremens at the Port of Baltimore was ended October 18 after a mediator ordered an end to the work stoppage and the leadership of the International Longshoremens' Association (ILA) complied. The strike by members of ILA Local 333 brought the transfer of cargo in and out of one of the nation's largest ports to a grinding halt.

Four days earlier the local voted by a crushing 517 to 25 margin to reject a local agreement compelling the ILA national leadership to call a strike the following day. Neither the ILA bureaucracy nor the Steamship Trade Association, which represents the port's employers, would reveal what had led to the strike. The ILA's decision to call the strike also violated a no-strike clause contained in a master agreement signed by the union governing all of its east coast operations.

Clearly the opposition to the port's employers was not limited to Local 333. Three other smaller Port of Baltimore ILA locals refused to cross picket lines and joined the strikers. Overall, the port employs 15,000 workers and is a major node of transfer for automobiles and light trucks. The ILA bureaucracy is hoping to limit opposition to collaboration with port officials to Baltimore and hopes to isolate the strike from other sections of the ILA.

Port officials denounced the violation of the no-strike clause and feared that the strike, as one media outlet admitted, "opens the window of opportunity for other ports." Richard Scher, a spokesman for the Maryland Port Administration, declared, "The port of Baltimore, regrettably, is the only port from Maine to

Texas that is not working today."

Maryland trash haulers strike, company responds with firings

The strike by Montgomery County, Maryland, trash haulers resurfaced a second time October 17 as workers at Potomac Disposal went out on strike again, this time joined by workers for Unity Disposal, another waste management contractor. Unity responded to the strike by its workers by issuing a letter in Spanish that fired 40 of the workers.

Jesus Garrido, one of the trash haulers for Unity told a local media station, "We are working with trash and they treat us like trash." Drivers currently make \$120 to \$130 a day, while helpers earn only \$60 to \$70 a day and complain about mistreatment by management.

Last month Potomac workers went on strike when management attached I-9 forms to their time cards--clearly an attempt to intimidate the largely immigrant workforce seeking better compensation. Unity workers went on strike last week after management fired a co-worker who was campaigning to obtain union representation with the Laborers International Union.

Canada

Rail strike looms

Over 3,000 railway workers at Canadian National Railway Co. (CNR) could be on strike or locked out by early next week if mediated talks do not yield a settlement before then.

Negotiations between CNR and the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference representing conductors, railmen and yardmen, resumed this week with a federal mediator after a two-week impasse. The union says it is fighting concession demands over extended work hours with less time between trips in a new contract. The last contract expired in July.

A work stoppage at CNR could halt grain shipments from Canada, as the vast majority are transported by rail.

University of Manitoba faculty to strike

1,200 professors and other faculty at the University of Manitoba are set to go on strike this week after the University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA) issued notice last week.

According to a spokesperson for UMFA, the main issue in dispute is academic freedom, even though faculty at the University are paid below the provincial average. The University has requested a provincial conciliator to help resolve the dispute and has also suggested binding arbitration.

In addition to concerns over the erosion of academic freedom, other matters at issue for faculty are the rights to email privacy and criticism of school administration. Talks are continuing through the week.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>