

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 September 2014

One-day strikes by Chilean mineworkers against infringements of labor rights

Mineworkers at Chile's Escondida open-pit copper mine, a joint venture owned by BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto, were called out on two 24-hour strikes last week on September 22 and 24. The mine employs about 2,800 full-time workers in addition to nearly 2,000 contract employees.

The workers' union, Syndicate No. 1, issued a communiqué that explained that the firm systematically violated labor rights regarding, among others, extension of the workday, attendance records, vacations and protection measures for high-altitude workers.

"The legal infractions incurred by the enterprise are framed in its strategic decision to obtain the maximum profitability from the site, increasing productivity and reducing costs, but passing on carrying out labor rights and demanding impossible targets from the workers," stated the document.

The statement added that since 2013, Escondida has been repeatedly fined by the Labor Ministry without changing any of its policies. "On the contrary, the infractions are maintained and repeated, in what constitutes a defiance of Chilean legality and the authorities entrusted with making them comply."

Calling the strikes "a warning and a call to resolve the incompletions and irregularities," the communiqué said that if Escondida did not implement the changes, "the grade and extension of the mobilizations will increase."

48-hour strike by Argentine natural gas workers to press for wage raise

Workers for the Camuzzi natural gas distribution firm in Neuquén, Argentina held a 48-hour strike September 17 and 18 to press their wage demands. The workers, members of the Gas Industry Workers Syndicate (Stigas), are also calling for a new contract.

Stigas blamed the company for not responding to its salary demands at the last minute, which had already precipitated a 24-hour strike the week before. A Stigas delegate complained that Camuzzi wants to impose a five percent salary raise rather than participate in negotiations. In a communiqué, the union threatened an indeterminate strike on September 24 if Camuzzi does not come to the table.

Argentine customs workers strike over pay demands

Customs officers in the Argentine Supara union went on strike September 18 as part of a strike to demand a wage increase. According to a union press release, the strike included a stoppage of work "with attendance at the workplaces" for the 18th and 19th, while on Saturday the 20th and Sunday the 21st, the workers would not attend to the public.

A union spokesperson explained, "The customs workers, like all the workers in the nation, have the right to a salary raise." The customs officers are calling for the government of Cristina Fernandez to increase the budget for their department. They claim that they are the

only public servants who have not received a raise this year.

Airports such as Ezeiza International and Jorge Newberry Airfield, both near Buenos Aires, experienced delays. However, the strike also halted or delayed truck and tourist traffic to and from Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, especially at the Salto Grande and San Martin bridge crossings between Argentina and Uruguay, where hundreds of trucks were stranded.

Brazilian factory workers strike for pay raise

About 3,700 workers at a Foxconn factory in Jundai, Brazil stopped work on September 11. The Jundai plant, located near Sao Paulo, is the only one outside of China owned by the Taiwanese firm.

Foxconn, which is notorious for its exploitative labor practices and low pay, holds contracts with a number of electronics companies, including Apple, which is putting pressure on its suppliers due to demand for its iPhone 6. In 2012, thousands of workers in a Chinese Foxconn facility struck against speedups, low pay and maltreatment by supervisors.

The workers walked out to demand better pay, as well as a framework for salary and promotion upgrades. They had already made the same demands in February 2013, but Foxconn dragged its feet on implementing the promised changes.

The Brazilian Labor Tribunal intervened and obtained an agreement between the firm and the workers' union. The accord gives Foxconn a year to implement the changes. The workers returned to the job on September 18.

Paraguayan teachers ratify strike to protest education cuts

On September 17, teachers in the Educators Federation of Paraguay (FEP) met in assembly to vote on a strike set for September 30, October 1 and 2. The teachers approved the action, meant to voice their rejection of the government's planned cuts in the 2015 education budget.

A FEP member, Silvio Piris, told *Ultima Hora* that the teachers "have been tricked again," since the education budget that the government sent to the Parliament was different from the one the teachers had been led to believe would be submitted.

"They've presented a totally different budget, with a difference of 50 million US dollars [less than the 2014 budget] that makes it impossible to pay a series of benefits that they were promising, as well as not granting the 10 percent [raise] that we are requesting for all the teachers."

Calling government words "double talk...they say one thing and do another," Piris claimed that the education minister "is not interested in education." He also lambasted Treasury Secretary Germán Rojas as a mentiroso reverendo (lying reverend or big fat liar), "because he presented a miserly budget to us that he had presented for education and he isn't even sticking with that."

If the strike is not headed off by discussions between the Education

and Culture Ministry and the Commission of Union Affairs, the National Federation of Secondary Students said it would join the teachers in the mobilization.

Salvadoran medical workers strike over salaries, lack of contract

The Salvadoran Social Security Doctors and Workers Syndicate, SIMETRISSS, struck on September 19 in various hospitals in El Salvador's public health network. In a press conference, 35 doctors who work as coordinators in 15 hospitals, without pay, stopped their labors as a protest against the lack of agreements with the agency.

SIMETRISSS requested a meeting with President Salvador Sánchez Cerén to discuss bringing salaries at the Social Security Institute (ISSS) into parity across the profession.

At various medical units and general and specialty hospitals, protesters held picket signs saying, "ISSS doctors demand respect and compliance with accords."

Police lockdown at Ohio school on first day of strike

Police in Reynoldsburg, Ohio locked down the Livingston High School campus during the morning of September 19 on the first day of a teachers' strike after reports of an alleged fight between two female students.

One student alleged police used pepper spray leading police to respond that no "chemical agents" were used against students. A school district official called the police action a "modified" lockdown where teachers and students remained in their classrooms. Some 360 members of the Reynoldsburg Education Association voted down the district's last contract proposal by 97 percent declaring it did not address their primary concern of class sizes.

Students had planned a walkout at noon to support striking teachers. Students said that the district combined classes together under a single replacement teacher and that this contributed to the tense situation in the school.

In the run-up to the strike, the school district spent \$360,000 for security. The district estimates that the cost for substitute teachers and security guards will be \$181,510 per day in the opening stage of the strike. The school board signed off on \$124,350 in one-time fees to Huffmaster, a notorious union busting firm that provided replacements and security guards.

A senior student told the Columbus Dispatch, "It's really depressing. Our teachers are important. They aren't just your teachers. I'm friends with most of mine." Another said, "I love our teachers. I want them with us, not the (substitute) teachers we have now." Many students hugged striking teachers as they crossed their picket lines on the way into school in the morning.

Pennsylvania workers on strike against increased cost of health care

Workers at Precision Custom Components (PCC) in York, Pennsylvania are entering the second month on strike against harsh increases in health care costs. According to the International Association of Machinists, which represents the approximately 130 striking workers, the company has boosted deductibles by some 100 percent.

Previously, the deductible for workers was \$200 and \$400 for families. In the current negotiations, PCC wants to raise the deductible for workers to \$2,000 and families to \$4,000. Other parts of the health care plan include pushing more of the costs onto workers.

One controversial issue is that the company wants to cap medical coverage for employees who are injured riding motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles. It is estimated that about 50 of the workers at the plant ride motorcycles.

PCC makes specialized nuclear-industrial parts used as components for the US Navy.

New Jersey nursing home workers locked out by management after strike

Workers returning to work after a three-day strike at nursing homes in Union City and Jersey City were locked out September 19 by Alaris Health. The strike took place after the 20 members of the Service Employees International Union had gone without a contract for five months and a series of unfair labor practices were unresolved by management.

The principal demand of the union is for additional staffing for front line workers who provide direct care of nursing home residents. Nursing home workers were also on strike at Alaris facilities in Guttenberg and Rochelle Park.

Saskatoon transit workers locked out

The City of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan locked out 330 transit drivers and other workers last week after the collapse of contract talks, bringing bus service in the city to a halt.

After being without a contract since December of 2012, workers rejected the city's latest offer by over ninety percent, thereby precipitating the lockout. Negotiators for the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), which represents the workers, say the two sides are far apart on the issue of wages.

While the city claims that the union has increased its demands in the course of negotiations, union leaders say that the increases they are seeking will only bring them to the level of other western cities. The city also cites opposition by transit workers to changes in the defined pension plan even though they managed to impose them on all other civic unions.

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