

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 November 2014

Latin America

Brazilian aircraft workers renew strike for wage rise, profit sharing

About 2,000 workers at Brazilian aircraft construction firm Embraer's factory east of Sao Paulo struck to demand better pay and a larger share of company profits. They were later joined by 7,000 of their coworkers as the shift changed.

The workers held a one-day walkout on October 21 over the same issues, an action that failed to budge management.

The strike followed talks between the firm and the metalworkers union, in which Embraer countered the union's 10 percent raise demand with an offer of 7.4 percent. The current official annual inflation rate in Brazil is 6.5 percent.

A union official told reporters, "Embraer is in a position to make workers a better offer. We shall therefore continue the strike until the firm ceases its intransigence and accepts our demands." The aviation giant reported a profit of \$342 million last year.

Workers have blocked access to the entrance, slowing delivery traffic in and out of the plant. The company says that 7.4 percent is its final offer, and that since the strike has started to affect "critical operations," it will take the dispute to the labor courts.

Colombian cab drivers strike over surplus of taxis

Taxi drivers in the southeast and metropolitan zones of Barranquilla, Colombia's fourth largest city, struck November 5 over the glut in taxis in the municipality. Cabbies, bearing banners and chanting, and following a plan *tortuga*, i.e., a "turtle plan," slowly drove up one of the principal streets, clogging traffic.

The main complaint of the drivers is the glut of taxis, which drives their wages down. The drivers, members of the *Sinditax* and *Sincotaxbarr* unions, want the government to take a census, which it has not done since 2002, and establish quotas and systematize fare rates, which currently vary wildly. A decree imposed in 2008 to make fares consistent is, in the words of one taxi firm owner, "a dead letter in practice."

Other issues that the cabbies protested about included harassment by management, illegal transport, the rise in the price of gasoline and payment of social security.

The protest was not a coordinated action by all the unionized taxi drivers. At least six unions, although they agreed with

some of the complaints, refused to participate in the strike. The protesting unions accused them of being company unions. Some of the protesters pelted nonparticipating drivers and their vehicles with eggs as they passed.

Sinditax head Orlinson Villa told *El Tiempo* that the mayor's office was not paying any attention to the *taxistas* and their grievances. "Therefore, they will initiate legal actions before the control organisms, because he and the union are not putting up with more abuses," the report said.

Costa Rican longshoremen return to work following partial deal

Striking longshoremen at Costa Rica's Atlantic coast Limon and Moin terminals went back to work on November 6 after two weeks on strike over the government's granting of a concession to a private company for a developing a "megaport." (See 4 November Workers Struggles.)

The union claims that the billion-dollar concession to shipping industry giant APM Terminals would constitute an illegal monopoly, jeopardize jobs and the environment, and result in higher taxes.

The *SINJATRAP* longshoremen's union reached a deal with the Atlantic Port Authority (*JADEVPA*) whereby the workers will not lose pay for the days on strike. Shortly afterwards, a Libertarian Movement Party politician, Otto Guevara, filed a lawsuit against *JADEVPA* alleging embezzlement and calling the payment for nonworking days "an abuse of authority."

The parties will negotiate with a court-appointed mediator present. Meanwhile, a court in Limon reaffirmed a previous ruling that the strike was illegal, rejecting the union's November 3 appeal.

Guatemalan doctors strike to protest lack of supplies

Doctors at the San Juan de Dios General Hospital in Guatemala City suspended their work in the emergency room on November 6, "arguing that the crisis of lack of medications and surgical supplies and infrastructure deficiencies in the hospital continues, impeding the delivery of better attention to the population," *La Hora* reported.

The doctors also complained of "a plague of rats, flies and cockroaches" that endanger the patients' health. They asked their supervisors to transfer the patients to another hospital in the area, which, however, "is also at risk of collapse due to the high influx of patients," the report noted.

An ombudsman visited the hospital, where doctors cited shortages or the lack of basic materials such as gloves, mechanical respirators and X-ray machines. They also complained about the scarcity of potassium, calcium and salbutamol, an anti-asthma medication.

Yet another facility, the Pediatric Infectology Hospital, closed its internal consultation area because of the lack of payments to suppliers and the nonpayment of the salaries of the entire pharmaceutical staff.

The health minister, Luis Enrique Monterroso, claimed that the crisis was provoked by the “bad handling” of the previous director and blamed him for not administering the budget in an adequate manner.

However, crisis is endemic throughout Guatemala’s public health system. *Prensa Libre* reported on the case of a hospital where patients who should have been attended to were on stretchers “in the emergency room in inadequate conditions.” The paper also reported that three patients who needed artificial respiration died because the hospital lacked that equipment.

Trinidadian hotel workers protest retrenchment of coworkers

About 70 members of Trinidad’s Communications Workers Union (CWU) marched to the Hilton Trinidad in Port-of-Spain to picket and protest November 7 against the retrenchment of several workers, and called for the resignation of the general manager.

The protesting workers, who were on their lunch hour, beat drums, carried signs and chanted in front of the hotel. After a standoff with security, armed police arrived, claiming that the workers were trespassing. After a brief discussion between the cops and CWU officials, the workers stopped beating drums, but continued chanting, leaving at 1:00.

The United States

Obama asked to intervene in slowdown by West Coast dockworkers

In a letter to President Obama, the National Retail Federation declared alleged slowdowns by dockworkers at ports in California and Washington State are threatening holiday retail sales. The letter alleged that congestion at the 29 ports along the U.S. Pacific coast is at a “crisis levels.”

Reports first began to emerge around November 3 that dockworkers in Seattle and Tacoma were slowing down on the job. This was followed a few days later by accusations that workers at the major ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach were also engaged in slowdowns.

A six-year contract covering 20,000 members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) who work at West Coast ports expired on July 1. The slowdowns began after the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents terminal operators and shipping lines, responded to an ILWU contract proposal.

The PMA charged that, “the ILWU’s orchestrated job actions are threatening the West Coast’s busiest ports and potentially billions of dollars in commerce.” It also said the ILWU leadership had reneged on an agreement that normal operations would continue until a contract was reached, something the ILWU called a lie.

Philadelphia city council bill calls for no-strike clause in hotels receiving city support

A Philadelphia councilman introduced a bill back in October that will require a no-strike clause for unionized workers at any city-subsidized hotel. Councilman Wilson Goode, Jr. said the bill will assure labor peace for hotel owners that lease public land or receive financing assistance.

UNITE HERE, the union that represents the city’s hotel workers, did not comment on the bill, but rumors indicate that the effect of the bill will be to encourage hotel management to consent to unionization of their workforces in return for collaboration from the labor bureaucracy. According to statistics, unionization of the hotel industry has fallen from nearly 100 percent to a mere 30 percent today.

Goode did not challenge such an interpretation. “If it also gives a union an upper hand—in a situation where the city has a proprietary financial interest—that’s a good thing,” he said.

Canada

City workers strike in British Columbia

Unionized municipal workers in the city of Castlegar, in southern British Columbia, have stepped up limited job action that has been ongoing since August to a full-blown strike that began this week.

The 34 striking workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been working without a contract since February of this year. Following mediated talks, the union rejected the most recent offer presented by the city because it did not address key issues of contracting-out and job security. The city wants to shift some unionized jobs to management and private contractors and, according to CUPE officials, is asking for a number of other concessions in a new contract.

While essential services must be maintained throughout the strike, the city has assured residents that all other services will also continue with the use of management and non-union workers.

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