

Riverside, California county workers stage two-day strike

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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More than 7,000 Riverside County workers in California walked off the job September 7. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents the various custodians, food service, engineers, health care and social service workers, called the two-day strike over unfair labor practices.

An SEIU Local 721 told the media, “This is about labor violations” and “safety issues”. But county administrators, having been able to unload higher health care costs on workers while agreeing to minimal pay increases, now wants to limit wages under the ever-higher cost of living conditions in California. There are also voices demanding that the county end defined pension benefits and increase the use of contracting services to employ cheaper labor in the county.

The strike has also been used by the labor bureaucracy to boost the fall campaigns for Democratic Party candidates for the state governorship, who they allowed to parade on the picket line. In 2016, the SEIU spent more than \$14 million to prop up the Democratic Party.

At the same time that Riverside County workers were on strike, the SEIU squelched a possible walkout by 10,000 San Diego County government workers. The SEIU accepted a miserable contract that includes a 13 percent raise spread over 5 years. The settlement pulled the rug out from under workers in Riverside County, leaving their struggle isolated.

Burlington, Vermont teachers set strike date

Teachers in Burlington, Vermont have set a September 13 strike deadline as they press for improved contract terms. Earlier this year the Burlington school board voted to impose new working conditions on teachers, bypassing contract negotiations. It was the second time in two years that the board had voted to unilaterally impose its terms.

The teachers voted by a 95 percent margin for strike authorization. The main point of contention are working conditions, with the 400 teachers in the district opposing attempts to saddle them with more non-instruction related

tasks.

Meanwhile, the Fresno Teachers Association in California has set an October 3 strike date for its nearly 4,000 members. The vote follows a year of failed contract negotiations.

Strikes by US teachers are becoming less and less frequent even as the threat to public education escalates. The virtual absence of strikes takes place under conditions where the Trump administration and its right wing secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, are carrying out unprecedented attacks on the public the schools. This situation is not a result of the unwillingness of teachers to fight, but expresses the reactionary role of the unions in suppressing the class struggle in the US.

Mexican water and sewerage workers strike over violations of rights

Workers for the Decentralized Potable Water and Sewerage System (Sideapa) in the city of Gomez Palacio, Durango, Mexico went on strike September 8 to protest violations of labor rights agreed to in their contract. About a hundred workers demonstrated in the esplanade of the mayor’s office and demanded her intervention, since their demands have been rejected by the director of the department, Adelmo Ruvalcaba.

Ruvalcaba called the strike a “crazy stoppage,” claimed that a minority in the union wants to “return to the rigged practices of yesteryear” and said that Sideapa would not be “hostages of the workers.” He added that striking workers would get their pay docked and that services would not be impacted by the walkout. He did not address the accusations of violations of the collective contract.

The secretary general of the Sideapa workers’ union told reporters that the union would present its strike declaration and complaint of the repeated violations before the Conciliation and Arbitration Board on September 14.

Panamanian hematologists strike over lack of medications

On September 7, hematologists at the Arnulfo Arias Hospital Complex in Panama City, Panama struck to protest the chronic lack of medications for their patients and demand that the Social Security System (CSS) come up with a solution to the problem. The doctors continued to provide emergency services and treatment of gravely ill patients.

A group called the Hematology Patients and Relatives

Association, or APPEH, voiced its support for the doctors, and some members held signs in waiting rooms denouncing the unavailability of medications outside of private hospitals, which charge exorbitant prices. The lack of medication for hematology patients has been a chronic problem for years, according to APPEH president Faustina Diaz.

In a meeting with APPEH and the doctors, CSS authorities agreed to create a labor board to address the issue, but since they offered no concrete solutions, the doctors resolved to remain on strike.

Colombian informal miners strike for compensation

Over 200 informal miners in San Roque, a municipality in the northeast of Colombia's Antioquia department, began an indefinite strike September 5. The miners, known as "artisanal" miners, took the action to press for the payment of compensation they claim was promised them for abandoning mines now owned by South Africa-based global gold mining company AngloGold Ashanti.

Inhabitants of the impoverished town joined the miners, who blocked the entrance to a project called Gramalote. A spokesperson for the protesters told reporters that for more than five years AngloGold Ashanti has reneged on offers of compensation to the miners for abandoning the mines.

In a communiqué, the firm disavowed any responsibility to pay compensation to the miners and said that the miners had to report to the authorities, since their operations were illegal. The strike broke out less than a week after a similar strike at Segovia y Remedios, also in Antioquia, was ended after 44 days.

Strike by Argentine long-distance bus drivers over unpaid raise

Drivers for four long-distance bus companies in Argentina stopped work on August 8 to demand the payment of a raise agreed to in parity talks. The Automotive Tramway Union (UTA) called the walkout in reaction to the refusal of Flecha Bus, TATA, Via Bariloche and Micromar to pay a 21 percent increase decreed by the Labor Ministry.

Other bus companies that had agreed to the hike were not struck and operated normally. However, according to the UTA, the four companies comprise 65 percent of business in long-distance bus travel.

The Long-Distance Business Chamber (CELADI) issued a communiqué claiming that there was "no accord between the chambers" of the sector and the UTA. Instead there was a resolution by the Labor Ministry that obliged the firms to pay the raise, an obligation they asserted was impossible to comply with.

Meanwhile, drivers for Patagonia Argentina Transporte Escolar Gratuito, public transit companies in the southern province of Chubut, struck September 8 to demand unpaid wages from August. The strike was the third time in as many

months that the drivers—also members of UTA—had to resort to industrial action to get overdue pay.

B.C. university workers poised to strike

About 100 workers employed by the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver could be on strike this month after giving their union, the International Union of Operating Engineers, a unanimous strike vote.

The workers maintain and operate the heating and cooling systems for the campus and have been working without a contract for over three years. According to their union, management is demanding concessions on scheduling and is refusing to make pay increases retroactive to the expiry of the last contract.

School negotiators have indicated that they will seek to have workers in heating and cooling deemed to be in essentials services and therefore barred from striking. No strike date has yet been set, but with 72 hours notice could now be called at any point.

Toronto employment agency facing job action

103 workers employed by ACCES Employment in Toronto are in a strike/lockout position and could be off the job as early as Friday of this week after both conciliation and mediation failed to produce a new agreement. Last week their union, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), requested a "no board" report beginning the countdown to a possible work stoppage.

ACCES (Accessible Community Counseling and Employment Services) is a government-funded non-profit agency that provides services for immigrants and the unemployed at five locations across the Toronto area. In March of this year workers delivered a powerful strike mandate to OPSEU in response to employer demands for a two-tier wage system, cuts in benefits and disability provisions among other concessions. There is still one more planned day of mediation this week for the two sides to reach a last-minute deal.

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