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Workers Struggles: the Americas

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Three Costa Rican public health unions—the Undeca Social Security workers union, the Bussco social and syndical bloc and the Sinae national nurses union—began a strike July 4, protested and marched against neoliberal government policies. Striking workers called for the dismissal of the Treasury minister.

Among the complaints of the striking health workers were the imposition of a value-added tax and a 0.5 percent cut in wages to finance the pension system. In general, workers oppose the increase of precarious labor and privatizations.

Workers from other sectors—judiciary, educational, municipal—joined the protests. According to the unions, at least 5,000 workers took part. However, essential services at hospitals and clinics—emergencies, intensive care, hematology, neonatology, oncology and others—were maintained.

Costa Rican truckers strike and blockade highways to protest tax

Members of the Union of Cargo Shippers Union of Costa Rica began a strike July 1, the day that a recently legislated Value-Added Tax went into effect. Truckers blocked the nation's main highways, preventing or slowing transport of goods to ports, particularly the east coast terminal of Port Limón.

The following day, the truckers union agreed to hold meetings with government officials over the tax, with a 15-day deadline to come to an agreement. The blockades were dispersed and truckers returned to work.

Mexican teachers strike for seniority bonus

Teachers at Mexico's Technology University of the State of Zacatecas (Utzac) struck the morning of July 1 to demand the payment of a seniority bonus owed from two years ago. The teachers' union, Sututez, already accepted a 3.4 percent salary raise, but failed to reach an agreement with the Utzac administration on the bonus.

Sututez stated that the bonus for last year should have been 1.8 million pesos (US\$94,700) and for this year 2.3 million

(US\$121,000) for the 200 educators, who teach around 2,300 students.

By July 4, following a meeting at the Zacatecas Education Secretariat (Seduzac), Sututez agreed to order the teachers back to work without having resolved the issue of the bonus. Seduzac head Gema Mercado Sánchez, referring to the sum of 20 benefits—including basic salaries, social security, retirement, vacation pay and housing loans—totaling 58 million pesos (US\$3.05 million), claimed “the impossibility that we have to satisfy more than what has already been negotiated.”

As in the last two years, the “dialogue” over the bonus will continue.

Colombian delivery workers protest lack of labor rights and poor pay

About 100 bicycle and motorcycle delivery workers for the Rappi delivery service held a protest at the company's headquarters in Bogotá on July 4. The workers, known as rappideros, demanded improvements to their labor rights and pay. Last October, they held a protest over the same issues.

One of the most important rights demanded by the rappideros is for the company to bear responsibility in case of accidents. They also want Rappi to pay them more for their deliveries, since the current rate of 3,000 Colombian pesos—less than a US dollar—is inadequate.

The gathering spilled over into the street, slowing traffic. Some of the protesters burned orange backpacks—the business's characteristic symbol—and a few threw rocks at the building. Rappi, which has branches in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay, issued a statement denouncing the actions, saying, “We are not going to permit the behavior of a few to affect the name of thousands of friendly and committed persons in offering a quality service to our customers.”

Rappi, in the manner of ride services like Uber and Lyft, promotes the fiction that their delivery workers are “independent empresarios” who enjoy “freedom” and “flexibility,” though rappideros have no say in determining their pay and conditions.

Argentine pilots and cabin crew hold short strike over government policies, job losses

The Association of Airline Pilots (APLA) and the Argentine Aircraft Association (AAA), which covers crew members, held a series of “informational assemblies” at the Jorge Newbery and Ezeiza airports near Buenos Aires from 5 to 10 a.m. on July 5. Dozens of flights, mostly at major companies Aerolíneas Argentinas, LATAM and Andes, were canceled or delayed.

The unions denounced the right-wing government of Mauricio Macri, whose “airplane revolution” has encouraged budget airlines like JetSmart and Flybondi at the expense of the aforementioned national airlines and has resulted in job cuts. An APLA statement said, “The colleagues at Avianca Argentina have not gotten their salaries for three months. Those of Andes were 84 and now they are 34; they had ten planes and now three remain. At Aerolíneas we have 200 fewer pilots and they deprogrammed 40 percent of the international fleet to draw income in dollars.”

Government and airline spokespersons claimed the stoppage had a “Kirchnerist” electoral agenda, a reference to former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, whose “left” Justicialist party lost to Macri’s Cambiemos alliance in 2015. The campaign season for the October elections has begun, and both Macri, with his unpopular economic policies, and Kirchner, who, though running for vice-president is seen as the power behind presidential candidate Alberto Fernández, and is facing corruption and racketeering charges, are seen as vulnerable. This has prompted the entry of former economics minister Roberto Lavagna, who postures as an alternative to Kirchner and Fernández.

Valparaiso, Indiana factory workers strike over healthcare insurance, wages

Over 130 workers at the Regal Beloit Manufacturing in Valparaiso, Indiana walked off the job June 30 after rejecting the company’s most recent contract offer involving insurance wages and other issues. International Association of Machinists Local 2018 business representative David Gault indicated that skyrocketing health insurance costs were a major factor in the strike.

“The raises our members have received the past two contracts don’t even begin to cover the costs of their premiums,” Gault told the *Northwest Indiana Times*. “The workers and their families are not moving forward—they’re moving backwards.”

The rhetoric from Local 2018 appears to represent an about-face by union officials after workers voted down the contract, according to the company. Beloit Vice President Robert Cherry said, “The union’s decision to strike after weeks of bargaining and reaching an agreement, which the union’s leadership agreed was fair, is disappointing ... We hope the union will reconsider its decision and honor the new agreement that was reached.”

Food preparation workers at Miami International Airport picket over poverty wages and poor benefits

Some 50 workers who prepare food for flights at Miami International Airport picketed July 3 demanding higher wages and improved working conditions. Workers are demanding Sky Chefs raise pay to \$15 an hour from the current average wage of \$12.95 an hour. Workers also want better healthcare coverage and a pension plan.

The protest follows a strike by ramp and cargo workers June 27 at the Miami airport. According to Unite Here the Miami Sky Chef workers are part of some 11,000 airport workers across the country that have voted for strike action.

BC forest products workers continue strike

Some 3,000 workers are continuing a strike against Western Forest Products and its contractors in British Columbia. The workers, members of the United Steelworkers, walked out July 1 over contract issues. The previous agreement had expired in mid June.

The strike takes place in the midst of a slump in the forest products industry that has seen production cuts and layoffs due to sagging lumber prices and high costs due to US import duties. Workers gave a 98.8 percent strike authorization vote. Management is reportedly demanding “massive concessions” according to the USW. These include a cap on dental benefits for life and long-term wage increases below the rate of inflation.

In a press statement, management denounced the union for balking at its demands and claimed, “it’s clear that the USW is intent on inflicting damage to the coastal forest industry, which already faces significant market challenges, including having to pay the highest softwood lumber duties for shipments to the United States of any jurisdiction in Canada and the loss of market share in Japan due to Japanese government subsidies for their domestic industry.”

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