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Latin America

Mexican postal workers protest low wages

Employees of Mexico's post office marched on January 20 from Mexico City's main post office to the federal legislature to protest the low wages that prevail in the government agency. The workers are threatening to strike.

Metardo Ramírez Ramírez, general secretary of the Independent Union of Employees of the Mexican Postal Service (SITSEPOMEX), declared that the union is demanding that the legislature investigate the post office's management and that it fire its director, Gonzalo Alarcón Ozorio. Ramírez accused Alarcón of harassing workers and of financial mismanagement.

SITSEPOMEX represents only 1,800 workers out of the post office's total workforce of 19,000. The Public Service Employees Union (STSE) represents the rest. Ramírez accused STSE with conspiring with management to hold down wages.

Ramírez also contrasted Alarcón's monthly wage of US\$15,000 with the poverty wage of most postal employees—US\$300.

Employees of Mexico's agricultural colleges threaten walkout

The Front of Employees of Agricultural and Technological Institutions (FSTAT) gave official notice of its intention to lead a strike of the 10,000 employees of Mexico's nine agricultural colleges on February 1. FSTAT is demanding a 20 percent raise.

The decision to strike came as negotiations reached an impasse, with the government only offering a 3 percent raise.

Public health doctors fight for wages in Nicaragua

A two-month-old strike by Nicaraguan public health doctors shows no signs of resolution. The doctors voted last week to defy government threats to fire strikers following a declaration by the Labor Ministry that the strike was illegal.

Three thousand doctors are on strike. They are

represented by the Federation of Doctors for Higher Wages (FMPS). On Friday, January 20 the conservative government of President Enrique Bolaños gave the strikers 48 hours to return to work or be fired.

FMPS leader Elio Artola announced that doctors intend to continue on with their struggle in the face of the government ultimatum. "Our demands are legal; things have been radicalized to this level due to government stonewalling," Artola said.

The doctors are demanding a 140 percent raise over two years while the government has offered 13.75 percent. It is generally agreed that the doctors' wages are well below comparable jobs elsewhere in Nicaragua and Central America. However, the Bolaños administration insists that the government has no more money for the doctors.

Nicaragua's largest health workers union, the Nicaragua Federation of Health Workers (FETSALUD), has refused to support the public health doctors.

Supermarket strike in Chile

Líder, Chile's largest supermarket chain, agreed last Friday, under public pressure, to negotiate with its 700 striking employees in markets in the cities of El Belloto and Viña del Mar, 11 days after the walkout began.

Up until now, management had said that it intended that the current wage structure would last for four years. It insisted that no negotiations would take place until 2010.

Supermarket workers have held rallies in Santiago and three El Belloto strikers are also on a hunger strike and will be joined by ten other strikers this Wednesday.

The workers are demanding that their individual contracts be replaced by a collective bargaining agreement that includes a uniform and higher starting wage, a 15 percent raise and bonuses for employees that work nights and weekends.

Líder owns 82 supermarkets in Chile. It employees 950 workers in Viña del Mar and 650 in El Belloto, 700

of whom—50 percent of the total for both cities—are on strike.

United States

Comair pilots narrowly pass concessions

Comair pilots voted 704-688, a mere 16-vote margin, to pass a \$17 million concessions package. The cuts included pay reductions of between 9 and 21 percent, elimination of retiree benefits and changes in work rules.

The Air Line Pilots Association did not endorse the proposal when placing it before the 1,700-member Comair unit. The contract will not go into effect until the company extracts concessions from its mechanics and flight attendants. Comair, a subsidiary of Delta Air Lines, is seeking a total of \$70 million in concessions from its workforce. Last month, Delta obtained a 14 percent cut from its pilots, which comes on top of a 32.5 percent cut in December 2004.

Court could force Ohio aluminum workers to repay unemployment awards

Aluminum maker Ormet Corporation is appealing a court ruling that the idling of steelworkers at the company's Hannibal, Ohio plant was lockout. If the court decision is overturned it could force workers to pay back unemployment benefits. In December, a county judge ruled that the 600 members of United Steelworkers (USW) Locals 5760 and 5724 have been locked out since November of 2004. As a result of the decision, the locked-out workers received \$2.1 million in unemployment payments retroactive to the start of the lockout.

But on January 18, Ormet filed an appeal of the court's decision in order that it might be "public record that it's not a lockout." The decision took the union bureaucracy by surprise. USW Local 5724 President Loren Hartshorn told the *Times-Leader*, "Our understanding was that Ormet wasn't going to appeal the decision. Unfortunately they misled us again."

Technicians protest Public Radio's attempt to undermine jobs

Members of the National Association of Broadcast Employees (NABET) are protesting attempts by National Public Radio (NPR) to undermine job security for some 100 technicians by calling on elected officials and other newsmakers not to give interviews to the news organization.

NPR has refused to continue negotiations with

NABET and throughout negotiations last year assigned bargaining unit work to three newly created supervisory positions. In December NABET members voted overwhelmingly to reject a proposal by NPR management that eliminated the old contract's no-layoff guarantee. NABET members are located in New York, Washington, DC, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Canada

Ontario school workers threaten strike

On January 17, more than 300 support workers at eastern Ontario Catholic schools voted 92 percent in favor of strike action if negotiations with the Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario do not produce an agreement. Workers, represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4154, have been without a contract for 17 months.

The main issue reported in the dispute is wages—workers' average wage is about \$18 an hour and the union is seeking a wage increase of 10 percent over four years, which is what elementary and secondary teachers were awarded last year. Conciliation is set for January 31 and February 1. The union represents full-time, casual and temporary workers, covering everything from custodial, clerical and maintenance employees to educational assistants and computer technicians.



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