

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Mexico: University workers end strike in Baja California

A month-long strike by administrative workers at the four campuses of the Autonomous University of Baja California Sur (UABCS) ended on September 18. The main issue of the strike had been employee pension benefits.

The strike ended after university authorities deposited 2 million pesos in the pension fund. The funds represent an initial installment of the 8 million pesos owed to the 200 administrative workers at the campuses of Guerrero Negro, Loreto, Los Cabos, and La Paz.

The UABCS has undergone several years of financial crisis and corruption scandals. In 2007, it declared itself in bankruptcy with a deficit of over 100 million pesos. The union that represents the administrative workers (SUTAUABCS) claims that at least 11 million pesos of the missing funds went to various former directors, including the current secretary of economic development of the state of Baja California Sur, Jorge Vale Sánchez.

## Brazilian General Motors workers strike

Some 19,000 GM employees in the Brazilian state of São Paulo walked off their jobs last Friday demanding a wage increase. The strike was the result of a collapse in negotiations between the union and management. The strike affects two GM plants, in São Caetano do Sul and in São José Dos Campos.

The job action coincides with the 13th day of a strike of 3,500 Volkswagen workers in the state of Paraná. In another blow to the industry, 60,000 auto parts workers in the São Paulo metropolitan region also walked off their jobs Friday. The employees of the Renault-Nissan in Paraná ended an eight-day

strike on September 12. GE had offered the workers a 6.53 percent increase in wages and a signing bonus of 1,750 reales (US\$970). São Caetano employees demanded a 10 percent plus a bonus of 2,000 reales. São Jose Dos Campos employees demanded a 14.65 percent wage increase.

Workers at the Renault plant in Paraná and in the Honda and Toyota plants in São Paulo did sign contracts with wage increases of 8.65 to 10 percent.

The Brazilian automotive industry is the fifth largest in the world in terms of sales and is expected to produce over 3 million cars this year. This represents a drop of 5.2 percent from 2008 due to the global financial crisis.

## Brazilian postal employees declared a strike

Eighty thousand employees of the state-owned postal and telegraph company (ECT) walked off their jobs September 17 to press for wage increases. The National Federation of Postal Employees (FNTC) reported that 33 of the 35 unions in the federation are participating in the strike of indefinite duration. The 33 unions represent 70 percent of ECT's 116,000 workers. According to the FNTC, the two remaining unions are studying the possibility of joining the strike.

ECT management denies FNTC's claims of the strike's impact. A management spokesperson declared that only eight percent of the employees went on strike.

The FNTC is demanding a wage increase of 4 percent to restore the loss of real wages accumulated between 1994 and 2009. In addition, the federation is also demanding a monthly bonus of 300 reales (about US\$150). The strikers are also demanding a reduction in the working day without a cut in wages to allow for the hiring of more workers.

## Colombia: Drummond Coal fires union leaders

Drummond Coal has fired the entire executive board of the local miners union (Sintramienergetica). Management has also

asked the Labor Ministry for permission to replace 4,000 workers at its mines in retaliation for a recent work stoppage, despite the fact that their strike was legal under Colombian law. Thousands of workers at Drummond's two coal mines in Colombia went on strike last March after the death of Dagoberto Clabijo as a result of an accident in an open-pit mine operated by Drummond in northern Colombia. The miners insisted that conditions are unsafe at the mine.

In response to the firings, Leo W. Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers' union (USW), sent a letter to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton protesting the treatment meted out to the miners. The Obama administration is stepping up its military aid to the right-wing Colombian government, which is notorious for its support of paramilitary death squads to repress the working class. The so-called paramilitary forces function as a division of the Colombian army.

A lawsuit filed in an Alabama court on May 2009 on behalf of the relatives of 67 Colombian union members and farm workers against Birmingham-based Drummond provided extensive documentation to support charges that Drummond collaborated with the paramilitary United Self-Defense Force of Colombia (AUC).

The evidence indicates that Drummond paid AUC to kill and to terrorize innocent residents perceived as supporters of Colombian union activities. In addition, the evidence suggests, "The collaboration between the AUC and the government of Colombia goes to the highest levels and insures that no serious action will be taken to bring justice in Colombia."

### **Pennsylvania teachers strike after talks fail**

Teachers in the South Butler School District, just north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were slated to walk out on strike September 21 after last week's contract talks failed to overcome differences on wages, health care, retirement and the length of school days. The strike will affect some 2,800 students in Clinton, Penn, Jefferson and Saxonburg.

Members of the South Butler County Education Association struck the district for 27 days last fall. This year, the school board attempted to head off a strike by offering to go immediately into binding arbitration. However, the union rejected the measure, citing the fact that the school board rejected an arbitration decision that followed last year's strike.

### **Las Vegas dealers protest stalled contract talks**

Two hundred dealers and their supporters chanted, "Two

years is too long" outside Caesars Palace in Los Vegas, Nevada to protest management's foot-dragging in contract negotiations. The 600 workers, members of the Transport Workers Union, voted to unionize in December of 2007 and are still without a contract.

The workers are seeking to restore conditions that were lost when Harrah's Entertainment purchased Caesars back in 2005. Among their demands are an end to the sharing of tips with management, restoration of one-hour rotations with 20-minute breaks and an end to arbitrary firings.

### **National museum workers to strike**

Workers at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa are set to strike Monday after talks between their union and the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corp. (CMCC) broke down in late August.

The 420 workers affected, including guides, archivists and other staff, are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). The main issues in the dispute include job security and wage parity with workers in similar jobs in Ottawa. Most of the workers at the two museums are hired only on a temporary basis and have virtually no protection against their jobs being contracted. In addition, their salaries are considerably lower than paid by other federal museums in the area.

### **City workers strike in western Quebec**

Outside municipal workers in the town of Beaconsfield west of Montreal went on strike last Friday although many, including sewer, street cleaning and repair workers, will remain on the job due to essential service laws.

Since garbage collection is privately contracted, it is unclear what impact the strike will have in the town. The striking workers are represented by the Syndicat des cols bleus regroupés de Montréal and are seeking the expansion of permanent jobs from 23 to 33. The city is not only refusing their demand, but is reportedly seeking a wage cut of \$5 an hour. The workers have been without a contract since 2006.



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