

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 January 2010

## Sacked electrical utility workers mobilize in Mexico City

Last Friday, members of the Mexican Electrical Workers union (SME,) marched through various parts of Mexico City demanding the reopening of the Mexico City Utility Luz y Fuerza del Centro, which was shut down by the government last October. SME members began a hunger strike at an SME protest tent across from the Federal Electricity Commission in this city.

A rift has opened within the SME. The government has accused SME leader Fernando Amezcua of having led a “horde of vandals” against followers of dissident leader Alejandro Muñoz last Wednesday. The incident appears to have begun when a group supporting the official SME bureaucracy tried to break up an opposition meeting, warning the dissidents not to scab. After being repelled, the group returned and allegedly assaulted the dissidents.

## Customs agents, forestry employees strike in Chile

Customs agents ended a 72-hour strike this Friday. The agents returned to work after concluding an agreement with the government over wages and expansion of the customs agency.

The strike affected border crossings and airports, causing delays. The strike also affected Bolivian links to the Pacific, prompting diplomatic protests from both nations. Bolivia, a landlocked nation as a result of the 1879-81 War of the Pacific, was granted access to the

ocean in a 1904 treaty “guaranteed by the Chilean government.”

In another development, employees of Chile’s Forestry Institute announced a strike to begin this Friday to combat what union leaders call “an escalating assault on worker benefits over this last decade.” Union sources pointed to a pattern of attacks on seniority rights and other forms of discrimination aimed at ridding the Institute of higher paid workers. The strike call was widely expected after a proposed collective bargaining agreement was rejected by 96 percent of the union membership.

## Bolivia: Tin miners’ strike

Four thousand eight hundred miners at the Huanuni mine, Bolivia’s largest government-owned tin mine, walked off their jobs on January 2 to press for a wage increase in 2010 and for the payment of a production bonus owed to them since November, which is equivalent to 15 percent of yearly income. The government had offered a smaller, 10 percent bonus.

The strike has also affected smelters at Santa Elena and Machamarca.

## United Airlines workers hold protests

Flight attendants and some pilots held protests at Chicago’s O’Hare airport and at airports in a dozen other US cities Thursday to protest lack of progress in negotiations with the airline over restoration of pay cuts imposed when the air carrier filed for bankruptcy in 2002. Protests were also held at United hubs worldwide

including, Frankfurt and Hong Kong. According to the Association of Flight Attendants, more than 300 hundred flight attendants joined the protest in Chicago.

Five-year contracts between United and pilots, flight attendants and workers in four other unions recently became amendable under terms of the Railway Labor Act.

The pilots and flight attendants are demanding pay be restored to pre-bankruptcy levels, and that 1,400 furloughed pilots and 1,900 furloughed flight attendants be returned to work.

### **TruSeal strike resolved**

Workers at the TruSeal Technologies window-products plant in Barbourville, Kentucky, ended their 24-day strike after management and United Steelworkers Local 8411 reached a new agreement. Workers voted 110 to 39 to ratify the proposal.

According to the union, TruSeal adjusted upward wages and bonuses to reach an agreement. “We ended up giving a little more than we thought we would,” said a company spokesman. The union did not spell out how the final agreement resolved differences over health insurance, retirement benefits, overtime and work schedules. Workers voted by a 153-0 margin to reject TruSeal’s original contract concessions.

### **Strike wave looms in Nova Scotia**

Over 7,000 hospital and school board workers could go on strike next week according to an announcement January 6 by a joint committee of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in Halifax.

The union has nevertheless made it clear that they will do everything possible to avoid a strike, and provincial CUPE President Danny Cavanagh has invited the province to come back to the bargaining table before the deadline. The strike would affect over 3,000 school board employees and 4,100 hospital workers outside of Halifax.

Key issues in the dispute include wage parity and job security with the two sides still far apart on wages. This is the first time that both of these sectors have taken coordinated job action in this way.

### **Strike looms in eastern Ontario**

Employees of Hastings County, northeast of Toronto, could be on strike this week if conciliated negotiations do not yield a settlement soon.

Over 200 county workers voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action last week and a number of them have already set up picket lines outside county offices in Belleville, Ontario. The workers are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and have been without a contract for over a year.

### **Vancouver airport workers locked out**

Around 300 food and retail workers at Vancouver International Airport were locked out January 7, in a surprise move their union, Unite Here, called “unprovoked and unilateral.”

Union leaders have protested the lockout, insisting that disputed issues could be resolved at the bargaining table. Unresolved issues include job security, wages, benefits and pensions. The workers have been without a contract since March 2009, and the union says that its request in December to have the dispute mediated was rejected by the employer, HMS Host.



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