

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 August 2010

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Honduran workers march to raise minimum wage

Thousands of workers marched on the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa on August 18 to demand an increase in the minimum wage. The current monthly minimum wage is 5,500 lempiras, about US\$290. The *Latin American Herald Tribune* reported that a raise was scheduled to go into effect in April, “but the hike was put off due to complaints from the business sector, the secretary of the CUTH labor federation, Israel Salinas, reminded reporters covering the protest.”

The marchers highlighted other issues as well. One was a demand that the government of president Porfirio Lobos—who was “elected” after the coup that ousted democratically elected president José Manuel Zelaya—reinstate workers who were fired by the National Autonomous University. Another was a demand for payment of the teachers’ pension and benefit fund, which according to Salinas has been in arrears since 2007 and amounts to around 4.6 billion lempiras, or US\$242 million.

Previous negotiations over the payment broke down over the teachers’ demand that Education Minister Alejandro Ventura be dismissed.

“While the CUTH is calling for a 30 percent increase, Honduran unions say they are prepared to negotiate with the government on the exact figure,” reported the *Herald Tribune*.

Teachers continue protests in Honduras

Demonstrations by teachers in Tegucigalpa are continuing into their second week. Classes remain suspended in most elementary and middle schools in the capital.

The mobilizations have taken on an intensified character, with the burning of tires and attacks on drivers and government spokespeople being reported in the news media. A march by teachers from the Universidad Pedagógica Francisco Morazán to the presidential residence interrupted traffic on the city’s main boulevards.

The teachers have been demanding payment of delayed salaries and respect for the country’s educational statutes, among other demands. The teachers have been in negotiations with the minister of education, but now

declare the negotiations “broken” and demand to negotiate directly with President Lobos. A commission of the National Congress has called on Lobos to declare a state of emergency.

Buenos Aires teachers stop work over city administration policies

On Saturday, August 21, a plenary session of delegates organized by the Argentine education workers union, UTE, decided unanimously to call for a stoppage and mobilization for 24 hours on Tuesday, August 24. The union, part of the Ctera education workers confederation, has appealed to six other unions that last Friday signed a document repudiating the education policies implemented by the right-wing PRO (Propuesta Republicana) administration of Mauricio Macri.

Sedeba (the Union of Educators of Buenos Aires), one of the six unions to which UTE-Ctera appealed, soon added itself to the strike and mobilization in all levels of education called by UTE.

“It was decided unanimously, with the vote of 350 delegates present, to bring the ratification of the proposal of a 24-hour stoppage to the meeting for August 24,” Eduardo Lopez, secretary general of UTE-Ctera, told *Página/12*.

Among the demands that the unions have made—and that have been ignored by the Macri government—are timely payment of salaries, the creation of new schools and kindergartens and retention of teachers at the middle and third level. In addition, the unions oppose the closing of grades and advocate addressing child mortality in the city, which according to Lopez, “rose from 7.2 per thousand to 8.2 per thousand this year.”

The union decided as well to support the struggle of the students who are demanding improvement in the infrastructure in the schools. “Our delegates denounced the fact that there are 45 schools with heating problems and 1,100 with building problems,” claimed Lopez.

Lopez also expressed support for Virginia González Gass, a popular headmistress of the National College of Buenos Aires who was dismissed July 21 by the University of Buenos Aires chancellor’s office. The dismissal sparked protests from the students and a one-day strike by teachers.

Four-hour general strike in Uruguay

For the second time in the five months that the government of president José Mujica has been in power, the labor federation PIT-CNT held a general strike and mobilization. The actions come in the midst of salary talks and the approaching presentation of the government's new five-year budget.

The education unions have been calling for 6 percent of the gross domestic product to be dedicated to education, while the Mujica government has stated that it will maintain the current 4.5 percent.

Other demands include budget increases and direct investment by the government for development, a plan for housing and expansion of the nation's health care system.

The strike took place between 9:00 a.m. and the 1:00 p.m., and included a mobilization and action in the Plaza Cagancha, in central Montevideo, where "columns of workers marched through the streets of Montevideo and concentrated in the center of the city, where there was a series of orators," according to La Mañana Neuquén.

Marcelo Abdala, member of the PIT-CNT board of directors, pointed out that "poverty diminished in the country thanks to the plans carried out by previous administrations, but also the layer of the richest sectors was strengthened. That shows that the distribution of wealth has not advanced and that it is necessary to deepen investment in education and social development."

The education workers confederation COFE urged tougher actions and announced its intention to carry out a 24-hour strike this week.

Chilean public prosecutors announce national strike

On August 19, the Chilean district attorneys union ANEF announced a 24-hour national strike for August 26 to protest the sacking of more than 2,500 public employees by the government of billionaire president Sebastián Piñera, who took office in March.

ANEF president Raúl de la Puente told *El Mercurio*, "The central motive for this stoppage is that the president promised that there were not going to be more firings, but now we have 2,500 people let go and they keep happening in different public departments."

De la Puente added that among workers with fixed-term contracts there is fear that they will be fired at the end of the year. He asked clients to be understanding and called on them not to be present at the departments during the mobilizations, to which ANEF expects to mobilize 80,000 public employees throughout the country.

According to *El Mercurio*, despite the strike call, de la Puente "affirmed that they are ready to dialogue with President Sebastián Piñera and come to an accord."

West Virginia defense workers end strike

Some 700 striking workers at Alliant Tech Systems (ATK) Rocket Center Operations facility in Mineral County, West Virginia ended their four-day strike August 19 and returned to work after management agreed to resume negotiations with Local 261C of the International Chemical Workers union.

Both sides have remained silent about details of the negotiations, although the union has said that issues of health insurance and pensions have deadlocked talks. The *News-Tribune* reported pickets carrying signs saying, "We're being robbed by a Fortune 500 company" and "ATK, we make it, they take it."

ATK, a defense contractor that employs 18,000 workers in 22 states, has made a killing since the launch of the "war on terror," with six consecutive years of double-digit sales increases. Last year it had revenues of \$4.6 billion and CEO Dan Murphy called the company's results "outstanding" in his annual report to stockholders.

Tentative agreement in Illinois teachers' strike

About 260 teachers for the Mahomet-Seymour School district in Illinois were scheduled to vote August 23 on a tentative agreement aimed at resolving their five-day strike. The school board and the Mahomet-Seymour Education Association (MSEA) reached the agreement last Friday after both sides agreed to substitute a one-year agreement for a two-year proposal and the union reduced its offer.

The new agreement provides teachers a 0.5 percent pay increase, while teachers' aides and staff would receive 1 percent pay increases. The increases come on top of a step increase of 2.1 percent for teachers and a 2.5 percent step increase for all other union members. In addition, teachers received an additional three sick days.

The MSEA had been seeking a 1 percent wage increase for teachers and 2 percent for aides and staff in addition to step increases. Teachers voted last week by a 211-25 margin to strike against the school boards proposal for a two-year agreement that contained no pay increase outside of step raises.

Heavy equipment operators strike at California landfill

Members of the Operating Engineers at a landfill near Glamis, California walked out on strike against Coffman Specialties last week over undisclosed issues. The strikers operate heavy equipment at the Mesquite Regional Landfill located east of San Diego. The landfill was built to accept 20,000 tons of solid waste per day over the next 100 years.

Quebec construction workers take job action

While unions are threatening all out strike action on August 30, construction workers in Quebec have staged work stoppages and other job actions over the past week at dozens of sites across the province.

L'Alliance syndicale, which is comprised of five unions representing 146,000 workers, scheduled two days of pressure tactics last week against the employers' group L'Association de la Construction du Québec (ACQ). But it is unclear to what extent recent actions were mounted independently by thousands of workers angered by the slow pace of

negotiations. All five unions involved in current negotiations have already received a powerful strike mandate from their members.

Talks have been ongoing for eight months but the ACQ is determined to wrest concessions from workers, which they say are necessary because of the economic downturn.

Staff strike at Ontario medical school

One hundred fifty-two administrative and technical staff at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) went on strike last week after mediated talks for a first contract collapsed.

Staff at the two campuses of the school in Thunder Bay and Sudbury voted overwhelmingly last month for strike action failing a better offer from management. There are a range of outstanding issues including wages, overtime and sick leave provisions.

The workers are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU/NUPGE), which has been negotiating for almost a year for a contract with NOSM. Talks only began six months after union certification at the seven-year-old school.



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