

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 October 2011

Mexican public sector workers petition for labor rights

Public sector workers presented the city council of Puebla a number of demands including dignity for union members, the right to assemble, freedom of thought and the freedom of about 180 workers to affiliate with the City of Puebla Employees and Workers Union.

The secretary of the union, Paulino Fuentes, presented the city council with a document that contained three petitions: “respect for the right to assembly and demonstration, a call for the municipal authorities to cease meddling in the lives of union members, and lastly that the affiliation of 180 workers be studied,” according to a Milenio report.

Puebla’s secretary of administration, Íñigo Ocejo Rojo, claims that only 16 workers would be eligible to incorporate, since the rest are administrative employees and outside union jurisdiction. In case the arbitration tribunal rules the union’s complaint as valid, the city council would have until October 18 to comply. If not, the union’s 2,300 members could be called out on indefinite strike.

Public sector workers and students strike, march in cities throughout Colombia

Public sector workers and students carried out protest actions in Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Barranquilla and other locales throughout Colombia on October 7. The strikes, marches and rallies were convoked by the CUT and CGT labor federations and by student organizations to call attention to issues confronting Colombian workers and students.

One is the increasing use of casual laborers (*tercerizados*) to provide services formerly performed by public sector workers. Another is the passage of the Free Trade Agreement with the US, currently awaiting approval in the Colombian congress. Demands around health care, job security, collective bargaining and human rights also figure in the protests.

In Bogota, about 6,000 protesters marched “to protest because the government has not fulfilled its promise to expedite a decree that would guarantee collective bargaining in the public sector and eradicate hiring of workers indirectly,” according to El Universal.

Supposedly out of fear of potential violence, Bogota’s mayor deployed over 1,500 police to the protest march, which was peaceful, and eventually dispersed because of a heavy downpour of rain. Colombia is notorious for the impunity with which paramilitary groups carry out the murder and disappearance of trade unionists and other activists. Twenty-two unionists have been killed so far this year.

The students’ participation in the march was connected to this state of affairs, since 16 of the murdered union figures were in the education sector. In addition to their denunciation of the violence against workers, the students protested “reforms” that would push toward privatization of education.

Strike by Brazilian bank workers continues

An indefinite strike begun September 27 by Brazilian bank workers is now in its second week. Over 8,500 public and private banks, 40 percent of the total, are affected by the action.

The bank workers’ main demand is a raise in their abysmally low salaries. The average starting monthly salary for a Brazilian bank employee is 1,300 reais, or around US\$735, lower than those of several other Latin American countries, and half that of Argentine bank workers.

The bank workers union confederation Contraf is calling for a 12.8 percent raise, but the Fenaban (National Federation of Banks) employers association remains adamant with their offer of eight percent.

Strikes have broken out among various sectors of Brazil’s workforce recently. In addition to bank workers there have been walkouts by postal workers, teachers, and metal workers, including auto parts workers at GM plants. One could add the strike by construction workers at Sao Paulo’s Maracana Stadium, which was ended by a court injunction two weeks ago.

Teachers in Buenos Aires strike over proposed changes to classification and promotion system

Primary and secondary teachers across Argentina’s capital city Buenos Aires struck on October 4 against changes to the city’s system of classification and promotion. The City Education Minister, Esteban Bullrich, calling the current system “the most cumbersome and bureaucratic in all of Argentina,” has proposed a plan that he asserts would bring “democratization, transparency and organization” to the process.

Teachers union spokesmen denounced the plan as an attempt to modify the Teacher’s Statute and give more power to the ministry. They also blasted a bill in the legislature that would eliminate the Classification and Disciplinary Boards, the bodies in charge of appointing teachers and assessing their performance.

Fifteen educators unions in Buenos Aires were involved in the one-day action, with union officials claiming an adherence of 100 percent. The protest included a march through downtown, with teachers carrying signs proclaiming “No a la dedocracia,” a reference to the accusation that Bullrich wants to replace “democracia” (democracy) with “dedocracia” (“fingerocracy”), i.e., classifying and promoting by pointing a finger (*dedo*).

Wisconsin Oshkosh Corp workers reject contract offer for second time

Workers at defense contractor Oshkosh Corp, in the city of Oshkosh

Wisconsin, turned down a five-year contract offer from the company for the second time in just over a week October 8.

The contact was rejected by a margin of more than 60 percent by the 3,000 hourly workers, members of the UAW Local 578. The sharpest point of contention has been over the company's efforts to introduce temporary workers.

On September 30, workers turned down a similar contract, rejecting the bait of \$2,000 signing bonuses. The company is also seeking to raise health care premiums and insurance co-pays.

Workers rally on North Dakota-Minnesota border to support locked out workers at American Crystal

Some 75 workers from eight different unions rallied October 8 to support American Crystal Sugar workers who have been locked out of their jobs since August 1. Workers carrying signs gathered on the Veterans Memorial Bridge that connects Fargo, North Dakota and Moorhead, Minnesota and elicited support from honking cars crossing the bridge.

American Crystal, the largest producer of beet sugar in the United States, locked out 1,300 workers at seven plants in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa after a near-unanimous rejection by workers of a massive concessions contract back on July 30. Currently, American Crystal is operating its plant with replacement workers.

On October 9, KFGO radio in Fargo reported that American Crystal and the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco and Grain Millers union may soon resume contract negotiations. "It remains to be seen what contract language concessions the union negotiating team decides to make, and whether American Crystal Sugar is willing to sit back down at the table to talk about it," declared KFGO.

Air Canada flight attendants serve strike notice

On October 9, Air Canada's 6,800 flight attendants rejected a second tentative contract agreement and announced a strike, set to begin as early as Thursday morning. The workers, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, voted the deal down by a margin of 65 percent.

Flight attendants oppose the company's plan to create a discount airline that would introduce a new tier of lower-paid workers, and criticized the slow implementation of rules governing duty days.

Both the company and the union leadership had expected the contract to be approved. Duncan Dee, Air Canada's vice president, commented in a statement, "We are perplexed and disappointed that two tentative agreements negotiated in good faith and unanimously recommended by the democratically elected representatives of our flight attendants have failed to be ratified."

Government officials have made clear that a strike would be met with a swift federal intervention. "We will be clear that a work stoppage is unacceptable in this time of fragile economy," Ashley Kelahear, spokesperson for Labour Minister Lisa Raitt told the Globe and Mail Sunday. The government has intervened in two previous disputes.

Strike at Ontario colleges

More than 8,000 support workers at 24 community colleges across Ontario are on strike as of September 1st after rejecting the latest contract offer even as school administrators pledge to stay open during the strike.

Workers affected are members of the Ontario Public Services Employees Union (OPSEU) and include maintenance and food service workers as well as IT support and scheduling staff. One of the main issues in the dispute, along with wages, is job security. The growth in the number of non-unionized part-time staff has far outstripped that of full timers and colleges are seeking to weaken their already tenuous rights in the workplace.

So far, teachers unions have indicated they will continue working throughout the strike so as not to disrupt the opening of the new school year, but that they will not fill in for striking workers.

Strike at McGill University

1,700 non-academic support staff at McGill University in Montreal went on strike September 1st in their fight for protections to pensions and benefits in a new contract.

The strikers are members of the McGill University Non-Academic Certified Association (MUNACA) and work in student and laboratory support and various other services. In addition to lacking basic guarantees to pensions their union says they do not have a regular wage scale and must wait up to 35 years to get full salary for their position. At last report in negotiations, the University was offering less than what the old contracted provided.

Saskatchewan college set to strike

Some 1,300 teachers along with 700 other service staff are set to go on strike at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technologies (SIASST) at four campuses across the western province after being without a contract for over two years.

The workers affected are represented by the Saskatchewan Government and General Employee's Union (SGEU) which issued a strike notice last Friday after rejected the employer's latest offer which included a wage offer of 5.5 percent over three years.

Negotiations have stalled since last January when mediation failed but SIASST is asking that a government mediator be brought in again to avoid disruption to the new school year, a suggestion which the union has so far rejected.



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