Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 December 2011

Mexican radio and television workers strike, occupy installations

Some 300 employees walked off the job December 5 at the Guerrero Public Decentralized Radio and Television Organism (RTG) in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, Mexico. The workers occupied five radio stations and one television channel to demand that governor Angel Aguirre Rivero dismiss the general director and to press their wage and benefit demands.

The workers accused the official, Misael Habana de los Santos, of violations of the labor rights of 315 workers. They pointed out that since the beginning of the current administration, Habana de los Santos has fired workers at five RTG outlets in Acapulco, Chilpancingo, Ometepec and Ciudad Altamirano.

They also allege that Habana de los Santos has attempted to lower salaries of announcers, reporters, editors, camera crew, technicians and administrative personnel, with the intention of bringing in allies, and has mistreated workers during the performance of their duties.

Among their salary and benefit demands are the payment of a retroactive raise—which to date has not been deposited—an increase of the year-end bonus, scholarships for employees' children, facilitation of loans and the end of liens on salaries. The last demand, according to one union official, has to do with attempts to avoid full payment of the end-of-year bonus by docking over one fifth of the bonus, supposedly for taxes, particularly targeting working mothers.

The workers warned that they would continue the occupations and other protest actions if their demands were not met.

Chilean couriers strike nationwide over meager raise offer

Workers for Chilean courier service Chilexpress roundly rejected the company's latest wage increase offer and voted to strike December 5. After months of negotiations between National Syndicate of Chilexpress and company bargainers, workers voted by over 80 percent against the offer.

Union spokesman Miguel Vargas told reporters, "The workers are tired of waiting for a readjustment that can reestablish their purchasing power," and said that the strike would be maintained until Chilexpress reconsiders its "stingy and insufficient" offer.

Vargas added that "the conditions and benefits offered by the company are unjust" and declared that the firm should "rectify its vision."

There are about 1,500 couriers employed nationwide by Chilexpress. Workers across Chile set up pickets and demonstrated in front of Chilexpress branch offices.

48-hour strike by Peruvian air traffic controllers

Air traffic controllers at Peru's Jorge Chávez International Airport, located near the capital Lima, struck for two days beginning December 9, delaying and canceling flights. The controllers demand increases in their salaries, which have not risen in 14 years.

Another crucial demand is the updating of the airport's aging radar system. Sergio Salazar, a representative of the air traffic controllers union, told reporters that due to its decrepit state, the system failed to function at least three times in November, though no problems were reported. He noted that the 10-year warranty of the system expired three years ago.

"What that signifies when the system breaks down is that when the controllers find themselves serving 10 or 15 airplanes simultaneously … in that moment the screen goes blank, communication is lost. That potentially is an outrage against operational security."

A spokesman for the Peruvian Airport and Commercial Aviation Corporation (Corpac) told Andina that a new wage scale would be instituted in the first trimester of 2012. He also claimed that despite the system's age, it functions fully and that Corpac has added new auxiliary systems. In lieu of changing the main system, he averred that it will be "repowered to extend its useful life."

Caribbean pilots stage sickout over firing

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Pilots for Antigua-based Leeward Islands Air Transport (LIAT) called in sick December 6, affecting around 110 flights in the Caribbean region. The action was taken to protest the firing the day before of Captain Michael Blackburn, the head of the Leeward Islands Airline Pilots Association (LIALPA).

Caribbean 360 reported that LIAT "has not given the reason for Blackburn's dismissal; however, reports were that this may be linked to comments he made on a local radio station relating to the flight operations department."

Although Blackburn did not comment on his sacking, the chairman of the unions within the LIAT system, Chester Humphrey, told reporters it was based "on spurious grounds" and was "meant to silence the union," which has been critical of certain management practices.

Humphrey sent a letter to LIAT management demanding Blackburn's reinstatement and warning that airline workers were "prepared to take any and all action necessary to achieve this objective and the pilots are assured of our collective solidarity."

On the third day of the sickouts, Antigua's Labour Minister intervened. On December 9, the day after a four-hour tripartite meeting, operations were resumed, although the issue has yet to be resolved. Negotiations were set to continue the following Monday.

Rally held in support of striking Wisconsin machinists

Hundreds of workers rallied in Manitowoc, Wisconsin December 10 to support machinists striking against Manitowoc Cranes. Many teachers and state, county and municipal workers who bore the brunt of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's attack on public workers last winter joined the rally.

Member of the International Association of Machinists Local 516 walked off the job November 15. Contract talks broke down over the introduction by the company of a proposal to strike language from the contract requiring workers in the IAM bargaining unit to be members of the union and pay dues. According to the IAM, Manitowoc Cranes also spoke of incorporating language into the contract requiring annual union recertification elections.

Shortly after the strike began, the company laid off 150 members of the Boilermakers union who also work at Manitowoc Cranes. Last week, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development informed the laid-off workers they are ineligible for unemployment. The state agency declared that any worker who "lost his or her work with an employing unit because of a strike or other bona fide labor dispute, other than a lockout, is not eligible to receive benefits."

Bakery workers strike California candy factory

Workers at the American Licorice factory in Union City, California are entering their second week on strike against company attempts to radically alter their health care coverage. Previously, the 178 members of the Bakery Workers Union Local 125 paid nothing towards health care deductibles. In the latest proposal American Licorice is seeking to force workers to pay half of the deductibles in the second and third year of a three-year contract.

The company's offer would pay workers yearly wage increases of 30 cents, 35 cents, and 35 cents, which will not offset losses on the health care plan. Many workers are indignant at the company's attack on living standards. The workforce is comprised of long-term workers, with the lowest seniority worker having logged 15 years with the company.

Newfoundland workers occupy plant

Last week, employees of Ocean Choice International (OCI) in Marystown, in southern Newfoundland, occupied and blockaded the fish processing plant in protest against its planned shutdown.

Workers moved in to stop the closure after OCI announced that it would be permanently closing both its Port Union and Marystown plants, leaving at least 400 workers without a job. Many of the workers had already been idled at both plants, but had been expecting to return to work in the new year.

The new Conservative premier, Kathy Dunderdale, blamed the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union (FFAW) for the plant closure, saying the union had turned down 18 weeks of work over the next year. The company claims that they have been losing money at the plant for years, but have claimed they would make every effort to help laid-off workers.

OCI continues to send fish elsewhere for processing and the planned closure is expected to financially devastate the region, which has historically relied on the now threatened fishing industry for its survival.

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