

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 January 2012

Mexican government workers hold limited strike over retirement fund repayment

Some 7,500 state government workers in Michoacán, México struck for eight hours on January 5 to demand the return of over 150 million pesos (US\$10,917,000) to the state's pension fund. At least 300 government offices—excluding health, public security and finances—were struck and in some cases blockaded throughout the state.

Antonio Ferreyra Piñon, head of the STASPE state government workers union, told reporters that the measure was taken after a decision in a general assembly. Ferreyra expressed fears that the funds, extracted as a “loan” by the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) administration of Leonel Godoy, will not be repaid when Godoy leaves office February 15.

Over 45,000 state office workers have savings in the State Office of Civil Pensions. The money was deducted from the payroll a number of times, and the government has dragged its feet in paying it back for several months.

Meanwhile, workers for the SEE state educational secretariat included an additional demand: the payment of the second half of the *aguinaldo*, the end-of-year bonus, which has been delayed. SEE officials belatedly claimed that they had already started the process of depositing the money that morning.

Laid-off Mexicana airline workers continue protests

Workers for the airline Mexicana de Aviación started 2012 by continuing their protests and petitions for a resolution of the crisis that has afflicted the passenger carrier since August 28, 2010, when it stopped operations due to economic difficulties. The shutdown affected over 8,000 pilots, attendants and ground crew workers.

On January 2, laid-off employees and their supporters picketed Mexico City International Airport (AICM) and handed out leaflets in the form of airplane tickets “with the hope of returning to work before February 10 although some are beginning to recognize that time is running out and the panorama is getting dark,” according to a *Provincia* report.

A pilot, Rolando Quintana Frías, has begun a hunger strike, which he declared he would not end until authorities respond to the petitions of the ASPA pilots association. ASPA does not support the strike, but spokespeople blame the pilot's action on the

“insensitivity” and “lack of political will” of politicians and investors.

Since Mexicana stopped operating, 29 different groups of potential investors have shown interest in rescuing the airline, only to withdraw later. The company has not, however, filed for bankruptcy.

Argentine trash collection drivers strike, ordered to binding arbitration

Trash collection drivers in Argentina's Tucumán province struck January 6. The strike against the 9 de Julio trash collection and street-sweeping firm began as a protest against the slow response by a supervisor in getting treatment for a worker who injured his hand in an accident December 30.

The supervisor concerned himself first with securing a replacement worker before obtaining medical attention for the worker 40 minutes after the accident was reported. Meanwhile, “he had to be helped by the neighbors since he was bleeding,” according to union leader Pedro Mamaní.

The union called for the supervisor's dismissal, and the Labor Secretariat convened a tripartite meeting, which failed to resolve the issue. The strike call was made on the 5th for the next day. Additional demands were added, including a food allowance and the return of some deductions from wages.

The director of 9 de Julio, calling the strike “disproportionate,” appealed to the Labor Secretariat, which ordered binding arbitration, a measure that requires a suspension of industrial activities for fifteen days. The workers were back on the job by noon.

Trinidad and Tobago: postal workers protest slow pace of contract negotiations

Postal workers for private postal service TTPost protested outside the St. James Post Office in Trinidad on January 3 over the slow pace of contract negotiations between the company and the Postal Workers Union (PWU). The negotiations over the 2008-2010 period have crawled along for over 40 months with no end in sight.

Some 50 workers from the Port of Spain and Diego Martin

postal routes joined the St James protesters later in the day, picketing and chanting against the standstill. Similar actions were taken in key areas like Curepe, Tacarigua, Arima, Couva, Chaguanas, San Fernando, Fyzabad and Princes Town, according to a *Trinidad Express* report.

PWU leader Reginald Critchlow denounced the Chief Personnel Officer for not granting the union's requests for a meeting. "They (TTPost) are a corporation; we are not public servants. The negotiations should not be subjected to the CPO's discretion," he said.

Claiming to be "fed up with this lack of negotiations," Critchlow added, "We will not stop (protesting) until we start negotiations."

New York City Opera locks out musicians and chorus

The New York City Opera company announced it would lock out musicians and chorus members after contract talks broke down late in the evening of January 8. The decision comes with the first rehearsal of the Spring opera season scheduled to open January 10.

Management cites deficits and a sinking endowment as reasons for unilaterally imposing a new agreement on the unions representing opera performers as it slashed its budget. Last year the opera company announced it could not meet the financial costs of staging performances in the Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theater.

The American Guild of Musical Artists and Associated Musicians of Greater New York rejected the company's offer, which would essentially turn musicians into freelance artists by reducing their annual income from \$40,000 to a minimum of \$5,000 for two productions. Under the old agreement musicians were guaranteed a minimum of 22 weeks work. George Steel, general manager for the NYC Opera, said, "... for New York City Opera to survive, we must transition to the model that most opera companies use: paying people only for the work that they do."

Federal mediation fails to resolve Indiana strike

Federal mediation between the Indiana Limestone Company and Millworkers Local Union 8093 failed to resolve the month-and-a-half strike at the company's Oolitic, Indiana operations. The 75 workers involved in the dispute oppose the company's attempt to scrap seniority rights and impose 100 percent of all unfunded pension liabilities on workers. Indiana Limestone Company was purchased a little over a year ago by the private equity firm Resilience Capital Partners.

The union has demanded an investigation into a December 2 incident when "company thugs" swerved a truck into a group of strikers picketing in front of the main gate hitting several workers and sending striker Danny Stephans to the hospital.

Ottawa Salvation Army workers strike

Against the advice of their union, around 60 workers at the men's shelter in Ottawa, Ontario went on strike last Friday primarily over the issue of wages, which are well below what is paid by other charities.

The workers are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and had been in a strike position for over two weeks before the union announced the strike. Many workers at the shelter earn just above minimum wage, making them not much better off than the men they deliver services to.

At the same time, top officials at the Salvation Army earn as much as \$239,000. The final offer that workers rejected included wage increases of no more than 3 percent, but the strikers say they would need at least a 20 percent increase to give them a living wage in line with their counterparts at other shelters. The company has refused to continue talks but has suggested binding arbitration to settle the dispute.

Quebec paper mill tells workers: take cuts or face closure

Workers at Stadacona paper mill in Quebec City received notice last week from White Birch Paper, which owns the mill, that they must accept the last contract offer or the idled mill will close permanently.

Although no details of the last offer have been released, the company was reportedly asking for major concessions when it closed the plant in early December, putting over 600 workers on the unemployment line. Their union, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) says it learned of this latest threat through media reports and complained that they were not informed first.

Connecticut-based White Birch filed for bankruptcy protection in 2010 and has since laid off more than half its North American workforce. It cited reduced demand, increased pension costs and the strong Canadian dollar for this latest attack on workers.



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