

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 February 2012

## Mexican teachers strike, demand end to insecurity

Some 300 elementary school teachers in the Mexican state of Guerrero stopped work February 8 to protest continuing dangers of kidnappings and violence committed by criminal gangs demanding extortion payments. Over 20 schools were closed, affecting 5,000 students.

Teachers were joined by parents when the state's governor, Ángel Aguirre Rivero, visited the Unidad Habitacional El Coloso, a neighborhood a few kilometers inland from Acapulco. Protesters carried signs and shouted, "Security first for the people of Guerrero, security, security!"

One teacher denounced "a situation so distressing that nowadays we can't even stick out a hand on the street; the insecurity is the worst scourge that is happening to us in our area." Another demanded from Aguirre Rivero "that security be a priority of his government, but not a simulated security ... not like ocean foam that comes with the wave but when it leaves the security disappears."

The governor told the crowd that he would meet with a commission of professors to resolve the security demands. After the visit, the bodies of two people in El Coloso were discovered, executed in their homes.

## Strikes at Mexican centers for special education and homes for the elderly

About 100 workers at the Rehabilitation and Special Education Center (CREE) and Los Tamayos Home for the Elderly in Oaxaca, Mexico struck for 24 hours on February 9 in support of their colleagues in the national Integral Family Development agency (DIF). The DIF workers are demanding that new working conditions be submitted to and recognized by the Conciliation and Arbitration Tribunal.

In Mexico City, about a thousand protesters demanded the reopening of the Home for Boys. The closure was supposedly for remodeling two years ago, but workers fear it will be used for other purposes to the detriment of the adolescents. One worker who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal told *La Jornada* that the remodeling "has affected the workers as much as the beneficiaries: boys and teenagers whom we don't know where they were relocated or how they are."

They also rejected the closure of the Home for Girls for fears that the same would happen. Protesting workers carried signs and banners denouncing "the privatization of social security." They marched and demonstrated in front of the human resource offices of the national DIF.

## Argentinean judicial workers strike for salary change

Judicial workers for the Argentinean cities of Zárate and Campana,

located in the northeast of the province of Buenos Aires, struck on February 7. The strike included a rally at the court building in the provincial capital La Plata.

The workers are members of the Buenos Aires Judicial Association (AJB). For years, the AJB has called for the reinstitution of Law 10.374, which established pay rates for judicial employees, officials and judges based on a percentage of the pay for a Supreme Court magistrate. The law was repealed at the end of the 1980s.

The recuperation of the law would raise judicial workers' pay significantly. "For example," reported *La Nueva Provincia*, "an employee with the lowest category would earn 4,000 pesos [US\$921] monthly, instead of the 2,700 pesos [US\$621] that he presently earns."

AJB Secretary General Hugo Blasco told reporters, "Although we do not ignore the complexity of the issue, since it has budget implications, it is also certain that we have been deprived of an acquired right and they did not consult us."

The action took place in the context of upcoming parity talks that the provincial government will reopen with public employees in the next few weeks, starting with meetings with educational unions.

## Venezuelan subcontracted drivers strike for permanent positions

About 300 drivers for six Venezuelan bus companies stopped work on February 8. The drivers are *tercerizados*, or outsourced workers who carry steelworkers to and from the Sidor state steel corporation in Ciudad Guayana, Bolivar state, near the Orinoco River. They struck as part of their demand to be given permanent worker status.

Jesús Mejías, a driver for Transporte Bufalino, told *Globovisión*: "We work at full risk without any social security. We render service to the contractors all day without counting on security. We consider our situation unjust, therefore we decided to take this protest action."

Another driver noted that the *tercerizados* earn about 3,000 to 4,000 bolívares (US\$700-900) without any benefits and that they had submitted a timeline for joining the permanent workforce in 2010 but have yet to receive a response.

The strike coincided with one begun the week before by 250 contract workers—with similar demands—at the Sidor steel mill. By February 10, both groups had agreed to return to work and to enter into dialogue with management. The drivers plan to demonstrate to management the viability of being given permanent status.

Sidor labor director, Rafael Tizamo, on the other hand, claimed that Sidor does not have the capacity to absorb more permanent status workers, and that the matter should be turned over to the Ministry of Industries.

## Trinidad dockworkers strike over unpaid back pay

Dockworkers at the Trinidadian capital Port of Spain shut down operations on February 9, complaining of nonpayment of the second tranche of back pay owed them.

Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (PATT) general manager Colin Lucas claimed that since the tranche had been promised “before Carnival,” it was not late. He denounced the strike and called for harsher measures to deal with striking workers as well.

The dockworkers had struck before on December 15 over working conditions and the poor representation that their union, the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union (SWWTU), had given them.

The job action was taken without the sanction of the SWWTU. The union president, Michael Annisette, had just returned from a conference in Belgium on the day of the walkout. Annisette told reporters he was going to meet with management to discuss the issues leading to the strike.

Most of the dockworkers have no faith in Annisette and the SWWTU bureaucracy. In December, after some obligatory tough talk, the SWWTU negotiating team kept the membership in the dark over the progress of talks, accepted a puny 5 percent raise over the length of the old three-year contract and declared victory afterwards.

### **Port of Seattle driver strike escalates**

The walkout by Port of Seattle truck drivers who haul cargo containers from the docks to rail yards has broadened since the initial protest on January 30. Some 120 workers quit work on that date to travel to the Capitol in Olympia, Washington to testify before a legislative committee describing a multitude of abuses by the trucking companies, which are squeezing drivers to assure profits to the big transportation operators. One of these companies, SSA Marine, is half-owned by Goldman Sachs.

When one of the drivers, Demeke Meconnen, was disciplined for going to Olympia, the walkout was joined by as many as 300 or 400 drivers, slowing down transport. The drivers complain that they are designated as “independent contractors”, which bars them from organizing. In reality, the drivers obtain their vehicles from the same companies that pay them. The trucking companies are pocketing a larger and larger percentage of the rate they receive from the big transport companies and passing on a shrinking percentage to the drivers who are compelled to pay for insurance, fuel and repairs.

The poorly maintained vehicles are both a safety and environmental hazard. Drivers are also being hit with fines by Seattle police for overweight loads that can amount to over \$700, something over which they have no control.

### **Wildcat strike by Brooklyn tech workers**

Just one week after several hundred Brooklyn, New York Cablevision technicians voted to unionize, another 120 non-union contract workers in the Bronx walked out February 2 on a wildcat strike. Corbel Installations, the contractor, issued a new policy that cut workers’ wages by 30 percent for the installation of Cablevision’s phone, Internet and television service.

The workers declared they wanted to follow the other Cablevision workers and unionize under the Communications Workers of America (CWA). Workers elected a committee to meet with management and worked out an agreement whereby they would end the wildcat strike, receive double their pay for the remainder of the day, increase the unit pay for the phone-Internet-TV installation by \$5, receive a \$10 bonus for each

home visited and another \$7 payout for multi-room installations.

For more than a year and a half, the Bronx workers had been trying to organize under the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) in a campaign that is bogged down in a disputed vote before the National Labor Relations Board. Corbel says it can’t recognize the CWA due to the labor board’s deliberations and charges that the CWA instigated the wildcat strike. The CWA is disclaiming any responsibility. A worker speaking to *Crain’s*, said workers launched the strike on their own after hearing Brooklyn workers had unionized.

### **California county workers call one-day strike**

Some 2,000 workers for Riverside County staged a one-day strike January 31 over the counties unilateral imposition of a contract that requires them to absorb a greater portion of the increased costs of health care. The Service Employees International Union Local 721, which represents 5,800 workers in Riverside County, held marches and rallies to make their anger known.

One day earlier, a Superior Court judge barred some 250 nurses and other healthcare workers at county medical facilities from taking part in the one-day strike. During the deliberations, a large contingent of workers broke into the chamber, chanting and waving signs. Deputies were called in to restore order.

Back in November, 90 percent of Local 721 voted to authorize actions up to and including a strike after the county declared an impasse in negotiations, paving the way for the imposition of a contract.

### **California Kaiser Permanente workers engage in 24-hour strike**

Thousands of Kaiser Permanente workers held a 24-hour strike January 31 over the struggle being waged by 4,000 members of the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) to secure a new contract with safe staffing levels and against demands for cuts in medical and pension benefits.

The NUHW workers were supported by 17,000 Kaiser nurses, members of the California Nurses Association, and another 650 members of the Stationary Engineers Local 39. The strike is the fourth action taken by NUHW since negotiations began back in 2010.

### **Pennsylvania optical workers go on strike**

Optical workers at Davis Vision’s Newton Square, Pennsylvania eyeglass manufacturing facility walked off the job January 23 after a 90-2 strike vote. According to the IUE-CWA Local 81408, which represents the striking workers, the workers are simply attempting to maintain salary and benefits in the wake of a new management structure implemented by Davis Vision’s parent company Highmark BCBS.

According to the union, Davis Vision is maintaining low pay and only offering increases tied to production while at the same time shifting health care costs on to workers. Davis Vision says it is offering 2.75 percent annual wage increases in each year of the three-year agreement along with an immediate wage increase for 32 percent of the current work force. Davis Vision also claimed that the IUE-CWA international union did not

endorse the strike action.

According to the company, its contract offer is having a splitting effect on the strike as a section of workers have crossed the picket line to return to work. The company has also stepped up production at other facilities in Long Island and Texas to compensate for lost production due to the strike

### **Quebec daycare workers take strike action**

Over 300 daycares across the province were closed for two days last week after more than 8,000 workers staged their second one-day strike on Friday to protest stalled talks that have left them without a contract for over two years.

Main issues between the workers who are represented by the Federation of Health and Social Services and the publicly funded daycares are wages, vacation time and scheduling.

While the government has said they are offering a wage increase of 6 percent over five years, the union says that much of that will be used up in increases to insurance premiums and in addition they are facing big concession demands regarding sick days and vacation pay.

### **New Brunswick airport workers set to strike**

Twenty-five unionized maintenance and administrative workers at Fredericton airport in New Brunswick are set to go on strike this week after voting overwhelmingly in favor of strike action last week.

According to the local leadership of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), which represents the strikers, there are a number of outstanding issues regarding wages and job classification for the workers who have been without a contract for almost three years.

A spokesman for Fredericton Airport says that there will be no interruption of service because of legal obligations for the union to provide essential services.

### **Newfoundland school food workers voting on contract**

After weekend negotiations resulted in a deal between the union and the employer, Ontario based Chartwells, over 120 food service workers at 42 schools in eastern Newfoundland will be voting this week on a proposal for a new contract.

The workers were set to go on strike Monday but their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) reached a last minute deal Sunday. Union leaders are not saying if they are recommending it to the membership.



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