

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 September 2012

Mexican university workers strike

Workers at Mexico's Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO) went on strike beginning September 7 to demand that the rector comply with a petition submitted by their union, STEUABJO, in February.

Key points in the petition include: payment of taxes for the "quality and efficiency program," which provides work incentives; the return of positions that have been retired; the removal of "at-will employees" (*trabajadores de confianza*) who were hired without STEUABJO's knowledge; and filling of positions by union workers.

The striking workers blockaded the entrances of all the buildings on the campus, allowing entry only to workers who came to attend informational assemblies. In the meantime, rectory negotiators and union reps have been attending ongoing meetings.

Colombian teachers and students march against right-wing education reforms

Teachers and students in cities across Colombia marched September 5 to protest education reforms being pushed by president Juan Carlos Santos. The educators were joined by students demanding participation in decision-making regarding higher education and a rejection of the privatization of education.

Media accounts of the numbers varied greatly, but participants in marches in Bogota, Medellin and other provincial capitals numbered in the tens of thousands.

Although the main demands of the protests revolved around the proposed education reforms, the teachers had additional demands. According to the teachersolidarity.com web site, "They are also calling for the protection of teachers and respect for their human rights and the implementation of the accord signed by the union FECODE and the Ministry of Education in June of this year."

Bolivian water workers suspend strike over lack of supplies

On September 7, workers for Bolivian state-owned water utility EPSAS suspended their indefinite strike begun August 28 after their union representatives signed a memorandum of

understanding with the AAPS water control and regulation agency.

The workers walked out over the failure of EPSAS executives to provide supplies and pay heed to a list of demands. Lorenzo Quisbert, general secretary of the EPSAS Workers Union, explained that the union had presented a list of 30 demands in February, but that management had not responded.

The list, in addition to labor demands, calls for infrastructure improvements, the provision of chemical supplies for water treatment and the purchase of supplies for repairing a fleet of vehicles that attend to emergencies in La Paz and El Alto.

On September 4, the workers marched to the Environment and Water Ministry MMayA headquarters in La Paz to demand the firing of EPSAS management. The mayor called on the district attorney to adopt measures against the protests, which, he said, "constitute a crime against the security of public services."

AAPS Executive Director Germán Aramayo told reporters that the memo "establishes a chronology that will improve working conditions ... in adherence to their demands."

Two-day strike by Costa Rican fuel truck drivers

Following a government decision not to renew permits for around 100 older model fuel trucks, fuel truck drivers in Costa Rica began a strike on September 3. The truckers are members of the Association of Fuel Truck Drivers (ATRANSE), whose president, Reynaldo Quirós, told reporters that the truckers were willing to make needed changes to their trucks, but they were not getting any support from the Environment Ministry.

Amidst complaints of real or potential shortages from gas station owners, police were sent to guard National Oil Refinery facilities to ensure that non-striking drivers would be able to fill up. By Tuesday, ATRANSE and the government had reached an agreement, and truckers were told to lift the strike while government and union reps met.

Nonetheless, Environment Minister René Castro told reporters that the permits would not be granted to the 100 trucks. "We can offer them alternatives ... like financing solutions, and we also are willing to listen to their proposals. But there is no possibility that these vehicles will be allowed on our roads, endangering the lives of Costa Ricans."

New York pharmaceutical workers locked out after rejecting

contract

About 350 workers at the Perrigo pharmaceutical factory in New York's Bronx borough were locked out September 4 after workers rejected the company's proposal for a new contract. The contract rejection came in opposition to the leadership of Teamsters Local 210, which considered Perrigo's 4 percent wage hike of \$1.80 an hour over the course of the three-year agreement fair.

But Perrigo workers, who have starting wages of \$8.50 an hour, disagreed. And high seniority workers are angry with the slow pace of increases. "I'm here more than 21 years and I make \$13 an hour," Lawrence McRae told the *New York Daily News*. "People are being cheated out of the right wages. We don't want greedy wages, just fair wages."

The old agreement between the company and the Teamsters expired August 31.

Michigan-based Perrigo supplies prescription and non-prescription drugs to major retailers, such as CVS, Rite Aid and Walgreens.

Federal Labor Board recommends injunction against Connecticut nursing home chain

The National Labor Relations Board has asked a federal judge to order an injunction against benefit cuts imposed on 700 striking workers by the Connecticut nursing home chain HealthBridge. The workers, members of District 1199 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), went out on strike on July 6 at five HealthBridge-owned care facilities in Danbury, Milford, Newington, Stamford and Westport, Connecticut.

Back in July, the NLRB ruled that HealthBridge refused to bargain in good faith with the union, making unrealistic demands. Among those were a steep increase in health insurance payments, the termination of the pension and its replacement by an inferior 401(k) plan, and reductions in sick days, vacations and holidays. According to the SEIU, their contract offer mirrored pacts ratified by its members at 50 other nursing homes in Connecticut.

The NLRB is a government body notorious for strangling labor strikes. Its decision to recommend an injunction against the company must still be implemented by a judge and could be drawn out. Whether the decision might be related to other events is not known.

Inspections by Connecticut's Department of Public Health found HealthBridge and its force of replacement workers guilty of glaring violations. Workers were incapable of articulating the appropriate steps in the event of a fire. Regulations related to infection control had been violated, the failure to maintain a clean environment, medication was not administered according to schedule, resident identification bracelets were missing, hot water was not administered at the appropriate temperature, and two instances of pressure ulcers were not treated properly.

Newfoundland airport workers to strike

Nearly 100 workers at St. John's International Airport could be on strike as early as Tuesday of this week if mediated talks fail to produce an agreement.

The workers, who are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada's Union of Canadian Transportation Employees (UCTE), gave their union a unanimous strike mandate last week, prompting a 72-hour strike notice last Friday. The workers, who include maintenance and emergency workers at the airport, have not had a wage increase in four years and have been working without a contract since 2009.

Management has pointed out that airports are considered essential services and that they expect little disruption in the event of a strike.

Strike looms for Edmonton Catholic schools

Nine hundred sixteen support workers with the Edmonton Catholic School board in Edmonton, Alberta, are set to go on strike this week failing a last-minute deal.

The workers involved are represented by the Communication Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP) and include office staff and teaching assistants. Workers at the 87 schools of the Catholic board rejected the latest contract offer last Wednesday and school board representatives have said that schools will remain open in the event of a strike. Main areas of disagreement concern wages and workload, with teachers saying cuts to work hours have increased demands on them and offset any wage increases they have received.

The school board has said that schools will remain open in the event of a strike and that support staff will be used to fill in for the strikers. The union points out that because all staff are required to undergo extensive security checks, the use of replacement workers will be extremely problematic.



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