

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 September 2012

Mexico City high school workers strike over unfulfilled agreement

On September 12, workers at 20 high schools in Mexico City began a strike to demand that the construction of new high schools be halted until the government complies with agreements to improve existing ones.

The high schools date to the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2000-2005) and are administered by the Mexico City government through its Middle Superior Education Institute.

The approximately 1,300 workers are members of the SUTIEMS Education Institute workers union. SUTIEMS general secretary Miguel Ángel Hernández told Radio Fórmula that there were two reasons for the walkout: “The first is that the educational field confronts a situation of budget abandonment on the part of the Institute, while the second is at the labor level.”

Among the first demands are hiring of personnel, provision of services and the construction of necessary infrastructure. Hernández mentioned the lack of teachers for students who have progressed to a new level. At the campuses of Iztapalapa and Álvaro Obregón, for example, about 450 students have been unable to take classes due to shortages of teachers and equipment one month after the beginning of the academic cycle.

Secondly, an agreement signed before the local Conciliation and Arbitration Board on July 4, containing a number of promised labor improvements, has not been acted upon more than a month after the deadline. Hernández added, “One demand that they were to give us no later than August 15 was a universal voucher for 3,000 pesos [US\$236] as compensation for 2011, that is, last year.”

Trinidadian teachers “rest and reflect” for two days to protest stalled negotiations

On September 13 and 14, teachers in Trinidad and Tobago stayed home to protest the slow pace of negotiations between its union, the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA), and the islands’ chief personnel officer (CPO). The meetings have been going on since July 2010 and deal with the period from October 2008 to September 2011.

TTUTA first vice president Davanand Sinanan claimed 75 percent adherence to the “Rest and Reflect” action on the first day and an even higher percentage on the second, over 90 percent.

The union called the action a “victory,” though no concrete results have come from it. TTUTA second vice president Orville Carrington was quoted by Trinidad Express: “We have not reached consensus on

those issues. But what we have detected...is a change in the mood, a slight softening from the normal dogmatic position that would have been normally adopted. There is a willingness to consider our position.” However, a Ministry of Education press release the same day disputed the figures and stated, “It’s regrettable that the education of the nation’s students has become collateral damage” in the dispute.

“Mr. Carrington added that the union’s priority will be to push for the External Labour Market Survey to be completed in the shortest possible time so their members can receive current market wages,” reported cntnworld.com. The union scheduled an Emergency General Council Meeting for September 17 to discuss further actions.

Bolivian mineworkers strike, blockade, march over control of tin mine

The Colquiri tin and zinc mine, located about 160 km south of the Bolivian capital La Paz, has precipitated conflicts between rival groups of mineworkers in the last few weeks.

The Colquiri mine, formerly owned by Swiss company Glencoe, was expropriated in June. Since then, workers in private cooperatives have vied with workers in the state-run Bolivian Mining Corporation (Comibol) over control of the mine.

The cooperative workers are calling on the government to hand over the lucrative mine to them, while the Comibol workers, who are affiliated with the Bolivian Workers Federation (COB), are demanding that the mine be nationalized. A decree on August 29, dividing control of a recently discovered vein between the two, only exacerbated the situation, leading to clashes that resulted in dozens of injuries.

On September 11, hundreds of cooperativistas blockaded three main highways leading to La Paz by scattering large rocks on them. The blockade followed the detonation of small dynamite charges on the road the day before by some Comibol workers. Traffic was paralyzed, with a counter-blockade held by truckers against the cooperative workers.

A cyclist died on the 13th in a collision while attempting to get through the blockade, and both sides have detonated dynamite, causing some injuries. Since then, the cooperativistas have put a temporary hold on the blockades.

At least 5,000 COB workers marched in the Bolivian capital La Paz as well as other cities September 14 to demand the nationalization of the Colquiri tin and zinc mine. In Oruro, the protest was particularly raucous, with explosions of dynamite and over 300 housewives joining their husbands with shouts of “Nationalization of Colquiri!”

The government began discussions with representatives of the cooperatives on September 13. COB officials are threatening to

escalate their actions if the government does not nationalize the mine.

Paraguayan teachers hold three-day strike over budget, salary demands

More than 10,000 public school teachers struck and marched in Paraguay's capital Asunción on September 13 on the second day of a three-day national strike that paralyzed 90 percent of the nation's schools. The mobilization was called by the Paraguayan Educators Federation (FEP), the National Educators Union, the Paraguayan Education Workers Organization and three associations of the Education Ministry.

FEP president Atilano Fleitas claimed that between 10,000 and 11,000 teachers gathered at the capital to demand the amplification of the national budget for education and a raise following the breakdown of talks with the government. The Finance Minister claims that there are no resources to meet the teachers' demands. The FEP budget demand is for 43,000 million guaranties, about US\$9.8 million.

The protesters marched from the downtown Plaza de la Democracia to the Finance Ministry and then to the National Congress, where they held a rally.

However, union officials later met at FEP headquarters, where they announced that they would put the strike on hold this week, giving the government until September 25 to respond to their demands.

California warehouse workers strike, launch protest march

Some thirty workers at a warehouse in Loma Linda, California that stores and ships goods for Wal-Mart walked off the job September 12 and began a 6-day, 50-mile march to Los Angeles. The workers are protesting low wages and working conditions that include laboring inside containers in 100-degree heat without access to clean water.

The workers, who are attempting to organize under Warehouse Workers United, make as little as \$8 an hour and are afflicted by worksite injuries. They are employed by a WareStaff, a temp agency, and NFI, which operates the warehouse.

This region of Southern California, which has sprouted many sweatshop warehouses, which serve as staging areas for imports from Asia, is known as the Inland Empire. Two class action lawsuits were filed over the past year against Schneider Logistics, one of the warehousing companies, charging them with illegal schemes to cheat workers out of overtime and shorting workers' pay.

Workers strike California hotel over intimidation, working conditions

Hotel workers at the non-union Embassy Suites in Irvine, California walked off the job September 12 to protest escalating tactics by the management company Hostmark. Workers report multiple disciplinary filings and threats of firings by the company over workers

wearing union buttons.

Embassy Suites brought in Hostmark after the previous company, HEI Hospitality, was cited for violating labor laws governing breaks. Full-time workers were denied compensation for loss of break periods and HEI received fines.

The latest clash is largely motivated by the overall poor working conditions, growing help care costs for workers and low wages.

UNITE HERE Local 11, which is seeking representation for the workers, has limited the struggle up to now to a boycott. Striking workers were dispatched to Pasadena where the Los Angeles County Employees Retirement Association was holding its monthly board meeting. The association is invested in an ownership fund for Embassy Suites.

Strike builds for B.C. University workers

Fifteen hundred support workers at the University of Victoria on Vancouver Island are escalating their job action after their walkout on September 5, as two locals go out on strike this week to press for a new contract.

The workers, who have been without a contract for two years, are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and include food service workers, housekeepers and skilled trades.

The University had offered no wage increase for two years in their last negotiation and 3.5 percent in the last two years of a four-year deal.

B.C. Government workers ban overtime

Also in the wake of their September 5 one-day walkout, government workers in British Columbia have instituted an indefinite ban on overtime work in the province in their bid to wrest a new contract from the provincial Liberals, after being without a contract since March.

The 26,000 workers involved in the action are members of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU) who, along with other unionized government workers have had a running contract battle since the spring.

A central issue in the dispute remains wages, with the government offering just over half of what the union is demanding for workers who have not had a pay increase in over two years.



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