

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 September 2012

Thousands of Mexican workers protest proposed labor law reforms

The Zócalo, Mexico City's historic central plaza, was the scene of a protest September 21 by thousands of workers who marched and rallied against a set of labor law reforms proposed by outgoing president Felipe Calderón. The proposal is subject to approval by the Chamber of Deputies (lower house of Congress) Labor and Social Security Commission on September 27.

Calling the reforms "Felipe Calderón's infamous proposal" that would subject Mexican workers to "vile exploitation," the protesters urged that the changes to the Federal Labor Law should be rejected.

The mobilization was attended by members of the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) and other unions, representatives of peasant organizations and delegates from the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the Workers Party (PT) and the Citizens Movement. Contingents of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena) and the Yo Soy 132 student movement were also present.

The official rationale for the proposed reforms is to make the Mexican economy more competitive and attractive to foreign investors. They would increase the use of contract labor, facilitate firings, accelerate the pace of privatization and relax labor laws in line with similar pro-business measures taken in other Latin American countries in recent years.

Additionally, Reuters notes, "The bill aims, among other things, to make public the accounts of trade unions, which have long been viewed as corrupt and prone to self-enrichment."

The union bureaucracies have traditionally been aligned with the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI), the party of Enrique Peña Nieto, who will succeed the National Action Party's Calderón on December 1. Peña Nieto has come out in support of the reforms, and commentators predict that his incoming administration will be a "litmus test" of the PRI in terms of both its image and its relationship to the union bureaucracies.

A smaller mobilization took place in Yucatán, where members of the National Workers Union (UNT) protested in front of the State Congress.

Mexican child care workers march over unpaid salaries, inadequate funding

Employees for Childhood Development Centers (Cendis) in Zamora, Michoacán, Mexico, marched and held a rally September 21 in front of the municipal building. The child care workers protested the nonpayment of their wages for the last 10 months and demanded that the federal

government provide funds to keep the centers in operation.

The march and rally are part of an indefinite strike begun on September 18.

María Teresa Mora Covarrubias, director of the Uatzitu Ahuandara Anhapu child care center, told reporters that the federal government has still not resolved problems with the budget and, despite having signed an agreement four years ago, has yet to provide needed funds for the centers.

She noted that more than 40 workers in Zamora wish to resume their labors if they can get sufficient resources to provide food and basic attention to the children, even if salaries remain "pending." She added that about 200 children and 17 older adults as well as some pregnant women are affected by the current conflict.

A similar plight exists in 12 Cendis facilities in various cities in the state involving some 600 workers.

Honduran teachers continue strikes and protests

Teachers struck and protested in the streets of cities throughout Honduras September 21 in their continuing struggle to get overdue salaries and annul two anti-teacher laws.

In the capital, Tegucigalpa, teachers gathered in front of the headquarters of the education sector's social security agency INPREMA to demand the payment of overdue salaries, some of which date to 2010. Education authorities have yet to explain the reason for the delays.

In Puerto Cortés, teachers blocked access to port facilities, an action that a local business group called a "crime against the national economy." Protesters blocked traffic in a number of other cities.

Other demands are the repeal of the Fundamental Law of Education and the cancellation of Special Development Networks, both promoted by the Porfirio Lobo administration and approved by the parliament this year. Finally, the protesters denounced spikes in fuel prices for 12 consecutive weeks.

The Fundamental Law attacks teachers' rights and living standards and facilitates privatization. The Special Development Networks are special economic zones meant to attract investment through tax breaks and the erosion of workers' wages and labor rights.

Argentinean hospital workers strike over security, supply shortages

Doctors and other workers at the Mariano y Luciano de la Vega Hospital in Buenos Aires struck after a fierce fight between rival gangs took place in the facility's halls the night of September 16, following the admission of a wounded gang member.

The medical workers demanded more police security as well as the provision of supplies to the hospital, which is located in a poor section of the city. The strike was lifted September 18 when representatives of the Argentine Republic Doctors Association (AMRA) signed an agreement with the Health Ministry that provides for the stationing of three police officers and three private security employees.

In addition, the ministry agreed to create a commission to look over a list of needed supplies, including such items as latex gloves, serum and bandages. Lastly, the ministry promised to contract a private company to repair an x-ray device—out of commission for a year—within 10 days.

A radiologist and union delegate told El Clarín: “A hospital that has 180 beds to attend to a population of 500,000 inhabitants, in a zone in which there is a lot of poverty and every time more situations generates violence.... The lack of access to health generates violence and we are the visible face for them.... Therefore we are convinced that in order to end the violence, as well as more security we need supplies and dignified working conditions.”

Trinidadian oil-rig ferry workers strike over unpaid raise

Contract workers for Trinidad and Tobago's Trinmar oil producer, part of state-owned Petrotrin, struck on September 16 over the nonpayment of a promised raise. The workers ferry oil workers to and from offshore rigs.

Until last August, contract ferry workers were paid at “market rate,” Petrotrin president Khalid Hassanali told reporters. Following negotiations with the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union (OWTU), the contract workers were made eligible for raises given to OWTU members. The promised raises have not materialized, so the ferry workers struck, blocking the boats that Petrotrin owns, bringing production at the offshore rig to a halt.

Claiming that the nonpayment of the raises was due to accounting department glitches, Hassanali blamed the OWTU for the action. Union president general Ancel Roget, in a letter to Petrotrin, said the strike “was neither inspired nor influenced by the union,” but “came as a direct result of your management's failure.”

On September 19, Petrotrin and the OWTU signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). According to the *Trinidad Express*, “The new MOA agreed, inter alia, that a full-time project team will be set up to review the differences between the rates contained in existing contracts already signed and the applicable rates as stated in the last MOA which was signed in July. That the company's auditors will conduct ongoing, random audits consistent and that Petrotrin will expedite repairs to all company vessels.”

The contract workers returned to the job for the September 19 afternoon shift.

Striking Ohio refinery workers urged to reject contract

The United Steelworkers (USW) Local 624 called on striking oil refinery workers at Husky Energy's Lima, Ohio, plant to reject the latest management proposal in a vote September 23. According to the USW, Husky refuses to conform to a pattern bargaining agreement that implements a new safety representative position and a fatigue standard that the union says will protect workers from working too many hours.

Husky management is also determined to eliminate local contract language that has allowed workers flexibility in taking vacations and permits USW members to swap shifts.

More than 235 USW workers walked off the job back on May 25. Earlier this month, striking workers travelled to Canada to protest outside Husky Energy's corporate headquarters in Calgary, Alberta.

Illinois warehouse workers strike

About 30 non-union workers at a warehouse near Joliet, Illinois, that stocks goods for Wal-Mart walked off the job a week ago to protest retaliation by supervisors. The workers went en masse to their employer, RoadLink, to demand a living wage and regular hours. RoadLink supervisors informed the workers they were temporarily suspended, after which the warehouse workers went on strike.

“They retaliated against us for delivering the petition,” Phillip Bailey, one of the workers, told the *Huffington Post*. Bailey, who makes only \$10 an hour, declared, “People are sick of taking it—the constant speed-ups, never knowing when you'll go home from work. My major complaint is we don't know when we're going to leave.”

The Illinois workers also filed a class-action lawsuit that alleges RoadLink requires workers to show up early and stay late but fails to pay workers for the time. They also charge the company only pays straight time for overtime.

Minnesota foundry workers strike

Some 150 workers at a foundry in Winona, Minnesota, went on strike September 20, after members of Local 63B of the Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics and Allied Workers rejected a proposal by Badger Foundry Company.

International representative Jerry Cotton refused to reveal issues behind the strike, declaring, “We have a good relationship” with Badger Foundry.

Recreation center workers begin strike action in B.C.

Fifty-five workers at the Nelson & District Community Complex in Nelson, British Columbia, east of Vancouver, began rotating strike action last Friday after a near-unanimous vote in favor of strike action the week before.

The striking workers include lifeguards, fitness instructors and technicians, as well as maintenance and custodial staff who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, (CUPE). Issues in dispute include wages, benefits and job terms for the workers, who, despite mediated talks, have been without a contract for more than a year and a half.

The union says that what the company originally offered represented increases below inflation with no cost-of-living increases in a two-year contract that would expire in six months. The company has since extended the contract offer to three years but with no movement on wages or benefit payments.



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