

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 April 2013

Brazilian teachers strike over unpaid minimum salary

Public school teachers throughout Brazil went on strike April 23-25 over noncompliance with a minimum educator's salary law that was passed in the nation's Congress five years ago. The teachers are members of the CNTE education workers confederation.

So far, less than half of the 26 states in the nation have put the 2008 National Floor for Public School Teachers into effect. The current official monthly wage for teachers is 1454 reais (US\$728)—putting it 31st in a list of 47 professions—but according to the CNTE, only the Federal District and four other states pay that amount completely, with teachers in the other states getting far less.

Other demands in addition to the regularization of the minimum wage are a raise of the minimum, more money in the budget for education and for teacher training, reductions in class sizes and better working conditions.

Actions during the three days also included marches, demonstrations, teach-ins and meetings with parliament members and government officials. On April 28, Education Day, the teachers returned to work, except in the states of Sao Paulo and Maranhao.

The CNTE has called similar actions in the past. In March 2012, the CNTE called a three-day strike with the same demands while denouncing the breaking of previous promises made by the authorities.

Colombian teachers strike over unpaid salaries, administration refusal to meet

About 100 teachers at Colombia's District University Language Institute in Bogota voted to stop work beginning April 26. The decision follows two months of delays in payments in salaries, with the director, Armando Granda, refusing to meet with the instructors or explain the delays.

Granda has also reduced the number of seminars and courses at the institute without explanation.

On April 24, the professors sent a letter to Granda requesting a meeting to discuss fourteen issues, including, along with the delays and the cutbacks: increases of class sizes; conflicts in assignments of courses and classrooms; the state of disrepair of buildings and classrooms; discontinuation of student activities such as theater groups, workshops and conversation clubs.

The educators have resolved to continue the strike until Granda calls a meeting with all the teachers.

Strike by Panamanian nurses over salaries, working conditions

Nurses in the 5,000-member National Nurses Association of Panama (ANEP) voted in assembly April 19 to strike the following Tuesday, April 23. ANEP had been negotiating with Health Ministry (Minsa) and Social Welfare (CSS) representatives for several months with no headway on salary and working condition demands.

Currently, a public nurse's monthly base salary is US\$745. ANEP proposed US\$1,500. Minsa and CSS claimed that the strike was unjustified because private sector nurses earn even less and there are no resources in the budget to grant the raise.

The strike was originally intended to last for 48 hours, but since the authorities refused to even meet with ANEP reps, it was extended two more days. According to a *Newsroom Panama* report, ANEP president Elidya Espinosa "told Prensa.com that they wanted to present a new wage proposal in which it withdrew earlier demands but still called for a serious salary increase."

After the health minister announced his "good disposition" to restart negotiations this week following ANEP's retreat on the salary demand, the nurses voted in assembly to suspend the strike at midnight of April 26.

Mexican airline's former workers protest to demand end

to two-year bankruptcy crisis

On April 24, pilots, flight attendants, ground crew and administrative staff formerly employed by the Mexicana de Aviación airline demonstrated in front of the Communications and Transport Secretariat (SCT) in Mexico City. The workers were demanding a solution to the crisis caused by Mexicana's bankruptcy nearly three years ago.

Compañía Mexicana de Aviación, S.A. de C.V., founded in 1921, was Mexico's oldest international airline, with over 8,500 employees. In 2005 Grupo Posadas, a hotel chain, bought the airline from the government. The airline soon found itself faced with shrinking market share due to low-cost competitors and burgeoning debt.

After gaining wage and benefit concessions from the ASPA pilots union, the ASSA flight attendants union and the SNTTASS transportation workers union, Mexicana declared bankruptcy in August 2010.

Since then, the airline's former employees have been in limbo as various private investor purchase schemes have fallen through, with charges of fraud, lawsuits filed by the unions and some former executives declared fugitives from justice. The workers have carried out a number of protest actions, but Mexicana's fate remains undetermined. Newly elected President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration said it would investigate the bankruptcy and restructure Mexicana.

On April 25, the SCT and union officials announced that the parties would meet "this week or in the next when the dialogue will begin at which the bankruptcy conciliator, Gerardo Badin, and Mexicana representatives will also attend."

Teamsters call off Ohio sanitation strike

Workers at the Carbon Limestone landfill owned by Republic Services/Allied Waste near Youngstown, Ohio began returning to work April 22 after Teamster officials called off the four-week strike against concessions without a settlement. The struggle was marked by sympathy strikes by hundreds of Republic workers at 20 facilities in seven states.

The Teamsters billed the strike as an unfair labor practices strike charging the company had changed working conditions, shorted workers on overtime pay and made illegal deductions. As well, workers opposed demands for concessions on pay and benefits.

But it is generally believed that what has unnerved the Teamsters bureaucracy is the demand by Republic to

withdraw from future contributions to the union-controlled Central States pension fund and instead foist the inferior 401(k) on workers. Martin Jay, a business representative for Teamsters Local 20, said the strike was ended after Republic committed to continue contract talks.

The company showed little sign of making concessions as its Toledo-area division filed a lawsuit against Teamsters Local 377 of Youngstown, charging it violated federal labor law by influencing Toledo workers to carry out a sympathy strike.

Ontario steelworkers locked out

Nearly 1,000 steelworkers employed by U.S. Steel Corp. at its Lake Erie plant in Nanticoke, Ontario, were locked out last week after workers voted to reject the company's "final" contract offer.

Members of the United Steelworkers Union (USW), the locked out workers are fighting demands by the company for a wage freeze, elimination of cost of living increases and cuts to prescription drug payments, vacations and other benefit provisions.

It is the third time that the company has locked out workers since it took over Stelco in 2007. The Nanticoke plant produces around 10 percent of the company's global steel output.

LCBO workers prepare to strike

Around 7,000 workers employed by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) could go on strike as early as May 17 if a contract agreement isn't reached before that date.

Earlier in the month, workers voting overwhelmingly in favor of strike action after their last contract expired at the end of March. Outstanding issues in negotiations are wide-ranging, from wages to health and safety.

The LCBO is the largest purchaser of wine and liquor in the world and a threatened walk-out would coincide with the Victoria Day holiday weekend.



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