

Workers Struggles, the Americas

19 November 2013

Mexican municipal workers strike, block streets to demand improved working conditions

Five hundred-forty-five city workers, including those in urban services, administration, cemeteries, parks and groundskeeping struck the Mexican city of Cuernavaca on November 15. The workers marched to the treasury building downtown where they were met by municipal police, who dispersed them. Police also broke up an attempt to block a main street where they were demonstrating.

The workers' union, the Democratic Syndicate of the City of Cuernavaca, had previously brought a petition to the city hall, but the city did not act on it.

The petition highlighted a number of violations of the General Labor Conditions Law, such as lack of uniforms, the "miserable" condition of tools and equipment, poorly functioning vehicles and machinery, unsanitary conditions of work site bathrooms, nonpayment of overtime and lack of a ranking scale for promotion and raises.

Demands in the petition include the prompt payment of bonuses, payment of pending settlements, a bipartite sanitation and health commission, respect for union rights and no reprisals against participants in the protest.

Despite the numerous issues brought out by the strike, the unions ended it after just three hours based on the city's promise to address workers complaints.

Mexican teachers strike over contract violations

Teachers on 21 campuses of the Michoacán Institute of Training for Employment (Icatmi) in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico went on strike on November 14 to protest violations of their collective work contract.

Among the workers complaints are: delayed payments of benefits, contracting of personnel without the correct qualifications, mistreatment of workers by administration officials, poor working conditions, assignment of hours in a unilateral manner and lack of adequate teaching materials. Training to update teachers has fallen behind by nearly three years, according to Icatmi Workers Syndicate director América Juárez Díaz.

Juárez Díaz told reporters that although the union had made some efforts at rapprochement with the authorities, the administration had not responded, thus necessitating the action.

She told *Cambio de Michoacán* that workers had detected ten contracted people who did not carry out any function, "We don't know where these people are or what jobs they do, but yes, they are on the payroll and they're being paid."

Costa Rica strikes, protests against growing inequality

On November 11, thousands of Costa Ricans struck and engaged in protest actions throughout the Central American nation to protest the deterioration of their living standards and the growth of inequality. Schools were closed, public services were halted and traffic was blocked in San Jose and other cities.

A number of outstanding issues were at the forefront in the protests: increases in fees for vehicle permits, taxes and electricity rates, reductions in teachers' salary bonuses, the corruption and pro-business policies of the government of President Laura Chinchilla and moves to privatize some services like health, education and the social security system, or Caja. They all pointed to government policies that favor the rich and increase the burden on the working class.

Marchers—including public employees, health workers, dock workers, teachers, students, taxi drivers and motorcyclists—picketed various government buildings in San Jose en route to the capital's Central Park, where speakers, mostly union officials, denounced the Chinchilla administration and "neoliberalism."

Two-day strike by Chilean public workers for pay raise

Public employees in Chile, members of the National Fiscal Employees Association (Anef), held a 48-hour strike on November 12 and 13 to press their wage demands. It was their second such strike in two weeks.

Officials for Anef and the CUT federation contended that 90 percent participated in last week's walkout, though the government disputed the 400,000 figure claimed by the union.

The CUT and Anef announced marches and other protest actions in Santiago and other cities. These mobilizations took place in the run-up to presidential elections November 17, in which the union bureaucracies supported the favored "left" candidate Michelle Bachelet.

The protesters demand an increase of 8.8 percent for most workers and 10 percent for lower-paid workers. The government has claimed that the national budget has to be approved beforehand.

Bolivian teachers and students strike over changes in teacher training college

On November 14, teachers and students at the Simon Bolivar Superior School for the Formation of Teachers—known as a normal school—in La Paz, Bolivia declared an indefinite strike. The protesters demanded a hearing with the government over a number of issues, including the refurbishing of infrastructure, improvements in computers and other equipment and a new performance evaluation for teachers.

Teachers and students have complained that the only real infrastructural improvements have been in painting walls, fixing some plumbing and other areas, but not in needed educational equipment.

Minister of Education Roberto Aguilar accused the teachers of manipulating the students and feigning concern over the state of infrastructure and equipment when their real aim was to get rid of the new evaluation system. Students and teachers took to the streets and marched in reaction to Aguilar's claims, countering that a new evaluation system is needed, but it should have student and teacher participation.

Argentine public school auxiliary workers strike to protest non-signing of accord

After representatives of Argentina's labor ministry walked out of a meeting intended to finalize a collective contract for public school auxiliary workers in Rio Negro province, the workers struck November 15. A large group of workers also demonstrated in front of the Provincial Education Council.

The workers belong to the State Employees Association (ATE), which has been in negotiations with the labor ministry for months, though some of the issues have been debated for years. The latest meeting involved, among other issues, the transfer of some 600 maintenance and janitorial personnel, out of a workforce of 6,000, from "precarious," i.e., nonunion, temporary contract status to full-time. The change would go into effect on January 1.

"There were seven years of discussion and more than 20 hours of revision. Then yesterday, when everything was ready to sign, the government representatives get up and tell us that they won't sign by order of the Minister [of Education] Zulma Reina," complained an ATE official. He added that the strike would remain in force throughout the province until the agreement was signed.

Guyanese cane harvesters strike over pay raise

Chanting "One percent can't wuk," sugar cane workers at two sugar estates in Province, Guyana walked off the job November 13 and marched to protest the miniscule wage raise offer by the government-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation, or GuySuCo. The march ended at an office of the ruling Peoples Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) in New Amsterdam, where they picketed.

A cane worker told the Guyana Chronicle that the one percent offer was insufficient and that the workers had already lowered their original demand from 12 to 8 percent. He noted that though the company claims to be in tight straits, its executives receive hefty salaries.

When asked to comment on the walkout, the Guyana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU) Regional Supervisor, Harvey Tambron, said that because the union was in negotiations with GuySuCo, the strike was unjustified. "No other gangs on any of the other estates are on strike for wage increases," he added. Tambron was silent on the issue of management pay.

Philadelphia construction firms receive token fines for deaths in building collapse

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has cited two companies for safety violations following the June 5, 2013, building

collapse in Philadelphia that killed six people and injured 14. Campbell Construction and S&R Contracting were cited for safety violations, including three willful per-instance violations. The fines for the two companies totaled \$313,000 and \$84,000 respectively.

Campbell Construction was demolishing the four-story building known as the Hoagie City, when it came crashing down on shoppers in a neighboring thrift store. S&R Contracting was operating the building's interior walls and floors.

OSHA found several violations of the agency's demolition construction standards, including the removal of structural supports for the wall that collapsed. In addition, Campbell was cited for failure to provide employees with hard hats, fall protection, training on fall hazards and inadequate fall arrest systems.

Ontario standards workers to strike

275 laboratory and clerical staff at the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) in Mississauga and Rexdale, west of Toronto, Ontario are set to go on strike this week after workers rejected a proposed concessions-laden contract from the not-for-profit company.

Workers at the company are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees whose negotiators say the company is offering a two-tiered pension system which pits new hires against existing employees. In addition, the company is demanding that workers accept lower wages and benefits in a new contract. CSA is the largest organization of its kind in Canada, widely recognized for establishing standards in a range of areas from homes to industry and trade.

BC city workers prepare to strike

Municipal workers in the city of Prince George in central British Columbia are being forced into a strike, according to their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

With negotiations dragging on for more than a year, workers in two CUPE locals voted overwhelmingly against a new contract in September and overwhelmingly in favor of strike action, in the face of demands by the city for a two-year wage freeze. The city claims that workers in Prince George are some of the highest paid in the province but the union points to the large pay increases for city managers over the last five years.

A strike could be announced any day once CUPE provides the required 72 hours notice to the BC Labour Board.



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