

Workers Struggles, the Americas

26 November 2013

One-week strike by Mexican municipal workers over unpaid wages, bonuses

Office workers for the coastal city of Ensenada, in the Mexican state of Baja California, struck November 15 against delays in the payment of bonuses by the mayor. The city employees, members of the Bureaucrats Syndicate, called for the payment of a 2,000-peso (US\$154) bonus for “efficiency, two-week salary and the savings bank.”

Nearly 1,100 employees went to their offices, but did not perform any duties. Bureaucrats Syndicate secretary general Ricardo Medina Fierro estimated that the administration would need at least 120 million pesos (US\$9,244,000) to make the payments.

By November 22, the union called off the strike, although the city still owed the back payments. “We’re going to sue because it’s a right that the workers have and as a syndicate we’re going to proceed to a collective lawsuit; beginning Monday [November 25] we have a lawyer reviewing the process... Somehow they’re going to work under protest,” Medina Fierro told Milenio.

Costa Rican health workers’ strike over firings declared illegal

Workers in 45 health clinics in Costa Rica began a strike November 11 to protest the imminent firing of 450 of their colleagues at the University of Costa Rica (UCR). The social security department and UCR have used threats, fines and legal rulings to squelch the stoppage.

The workers are members of Basic Integral Health Attention Teams or Ebáis, which are, according to qcostarica.com, “clinics set up by the Social Security system (Caja) and contracted out to private sources for their administration. They attend chronic and routine medical conditions that do not need the services of a public hospital or clinic and are more convenient for poorer patients because they are closer to their homes.”

La Nación reported November 22: “This personnel will remain unemployed in February, when the state university transfers the administration of those health services to the private Unibe university.” The Caja awarded the contract—worth 4,900,000,000 colones or US\$9,829,000—to Unibe for 36 Ebáis in the east of the country. It is scheduled to begin February 15, 2014.

Negotiations between the UCR employees union SINDEU on reassigning the displaced workers have brought no solution. According to www.columbia.co.cr, “SINDEU denounced the fact that the majority of workers have not sought employment with Unibe... because the salaries that they will offer are inferior to what is established by law.”

The Caja has engaged in a war of attrition against the workers. UCR rector Henning Jensen, claiming that the university could be fined up to 275,000,000 colones (US\$551,000) for the stoppage, told reporters, “We cannot tolerate actions that go beyond the limits of caution and good sense,” and urged the workers to give up the strike. “Now, we’ll have to begin a process of recontracting because the legal link is dissolved.”

One district labor court has declared the strike illegal, and rulings from other districts are expected this week. “According to calculations made by the University, after being informed of the court ruling, some 300 workers of the 450 on strike returned to work,” reported *La Nación*.

Workers at Argentine hospital hold one-day strike over personnel shortages, nonresponse to petition

Workers at the Regional Hospital in Comodoro Rivadavia in Argentina’s southern Chubut province held a one-day strike and street demonstration to protest the lack of adequate personnel and management’s nonresponse to their demands.

Wearing colorful masks inscribed with the names of the sectors in need of additional workers, the demonstrators drew attention to the issue for about two hours in the Plaza Roca on San Martín Street. They were accompanied by retired health workers.

The hospital workers have complained of the lack of personnel at the hospital for months. They have petitioned for more doctors, so that each shift would have at least three. Security personnel as well are insufficient. They have also issued an urgent call for parity talks that should have begun in November, according to their collective agreement.

A doctor at the hospital told reporters that the strike was a change of tactics from the half-day stoppages that the workers had carried out previously, and which produced no response from management. She added that, if the one-day action failed to bring results, they would strike for 48 hours on the 27th and 28th, and if necessary, call an indefinite strike on December 1.

Argentine port workers’ turf battle brings 24-hour strike

On November 20, at the Argentine ports of Buenos Aires, Dock Sud, Zárate, Campana, Lima and San Nicolás, workers in the Winch Operators and Mobile Crane Machinists Union (Sgmgm) struck for 24 hours.

The daily *La Prensa* described the action as “a new chapter in the classification conflict that they maintain with the United Argentine Port Workers Syndicate (SUPA).” For over 20 years, the two unions, both under the umbrella of the Peronist CGT federation under the leadership of Hugo Moyano, have vied for turf on the nation’s docks.

The latest flare-up stems from a dispute over twelve workers at the Exolgan Container Terminal in Buenos Aires. Sgmgm general secretary Roberto Coria accused SUPA of tactics that “break and divide” the labor movement and claimed that the workers should belong to Sgmgm in accordance with the Collective Labor Agreements.

SUPA boss Juan Corvalán blamed the Labor Ministry for not bringing about an agreement that both unions could live with.

The strike coincided with a protest, carried out by a self-styled “Bolivarian” grouping called Quebracho against the arrival of a British ship that stops at the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. Sgmgm members “protagonized...a polemic with members of Quebracho,” reported *La Prensa*.

According to a report in *La Nación*, “Of Peronist extraction, both unions

maintained a de facto peace in the ports in the last two or three years, and conducted dialogues to stop the advance in the bases of the movement of the left.”

Barbados water workers strike over wage talks impasse

Some 500 workers for the Barbados Water Authority (BWA) walked off the job November 21 over stalled talks between the BWA and their union, the Barbados Workers’ Union (BWU). After assembling in front of the BWA Manor Lodge office, the workers met with union reps.

The main bone of contention is BWA’s failure to agree to a wage increase, though news coverage did not state the figures being discussed.

On November 22, over 100 workers picketed the BWA Manor Lodge office. Police were called in, but made no arrests.

According to a *Nation News* report, “Senator Sir Roy Trotman, general secretary of the Barbados Workers Union (BWU), the largest and oldest trade union, said that customers will still receive service.” The report quoted Trotman: “We took care to ensure that all appropriate serious departments were manned but outside of that, everybody at the Water Authority is engaged and is fully involved in the struggle for the respect that we are demanding.”

Guyana: Public employees protest government pay offer

On November 22, Guyanese public employees, including nurses and workers at the agricultural, geological and mines departments, protested a 5 percent retroactive wage hike announced by the Public Services Ministry (PSM). The workers picketed their workplaces with signs denouncing the miniscule offer and demanding the 25 percent that the Guyana Public Services Union (GPSU) has called for. The GPSU, citing fruitless negotiations, has requested arbitration by the Ministry of Labour.

Thirty-six hour strike by southern California port truck drivers

Truck drivers seeking union representation carried out a 36-hour strike November 18 against three trucking firms that operate out of the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. For drivers at Green Fleet Systems, it was their second strike in three months.

The Teamsters Union, which is seeking to organize the drivers, claims that Green Fleet, Pac 9 Transportation, and American Logistics International are subjecting drivers to harassment and intimidation to prevent unionization of the workforce. Further, management at American Logistics is misclassifying drivers as independent contractors. By defining drivers as contractors, the expense of vehicle maintenance can be transferred from the company to the worker and full-time benefits denied.

The trucking industry that connects the import of goods to the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports and the so-called “Inland Empire” of warehouses owned by Costco, Walmart, Forever 21, and Skechers is dominated by independent contractors and for the most part has evaded unionization.

Labor Board to recommend legal action against Walmart

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) announced November 18 it would recommend legal action against Walmart for retaliatory firings of workers who took part in strikes and a June demonstration at the company’s shareholder meeting in Bentonville, Arkansas headquarters. OURWalmart, a union-backed organization, alleges the company fired and disciplined 117 workers and claims that company management engaged in other activities aimed at intimidating workers from striking.

The NLRB began investigating some of these cases back in September. One of the threats cited was a statement by Walmart spokesman, David Tovar, on *CBS News* who warned “there could be consequences” should employees strike.

Walmart responded to the NLRB’s announcement saying it was “just a procedural step” and that their actions were “legal and justified.”

Heinz to shutter southern Ontario plant

740 workers at the H.J. Heinz Company’s plant in Leamington, Ontario just east of Detroit, are slated to lose their jobs with the announcement by the company that they will be closing the processing facility by the middle of next year.

The shutdown comes after Heinz was purchased last year by Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway and 3G Capital in the largest deal of its kind in history, taking it from a publicly traded to a privately owned company.

(Since the announced shutdown, the Ontario government has said that while they are unable to prevent the massive job losses, they will offer assistance to find other jobs for workers, announcing a paltry \$200,000 in funding. Rob Crawford, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) which represents workers at the Leamington plant, has asked that workers do “what’s right and not what’s easy”, as he negotiates the “best plant closure deal I can get”.

Nova Scotia bus drivers prepared to strike

While no strike date has yet been set, over 400 bus drivers and other staff in Truro, Nova Scotia voted last week to reject the “final” contract offer from the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board after delivering a strong strike mandate to their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

A central issue in the stalemate centers on contracting out and job security for workers, which the union says it has taken a firm stand on. A conciliator is expected to deliver a report in the coming days, after which a strike date could be set.



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