

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 January 2014

Mexican teachers reject union's back-to-work call

On January 6, in the Mexican state of Aguascalientes, teachers in Section 1 of the National Education Syndicate (SNTE) went on strike to demand payments of bonuses, tax rebates and unfulfilled deposits, some from over two years ago. Teachers picketed the entrances to public schools and prevented students from entering.

Nearly 20,000 teachers in Aguascalientes are members of SNTE, a notoriously corrupt union whose president, Elba Ester Gordillo, is currently behind bars under charges of embezzlement.

That afternoon, SNTE announced that it had ended the strike and would hold meetings with the Aguascalientes Education Institute (IEA) to address the issues. However, the teachers did not return to class on January 7, disavowing Section 1 director Juana Alicia Espinosa, "considering that she presently does not represent their interests and she is violating the statutes of the Syndicate, every time acting as well as a local representative of the New Alliance Party (Panal)," as reported by El Universal.

In 2005, after Gordillo had a falling-out with SNTE's traditional ally, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), she openly backed National Action Party (PAN) presidential candidate Felipe Calderón. She then formed the Panal, which has supported most of the pro-market education "reforms" pushed by both the PAN and the PRI.

On January 9, the fourth day of the strike, Governor Carlos Lozano de la Torre announced that he had given instructions to the Finance Secretary to make the payments of "the legitimate demands" of the teachers. The striking teachers did not announce that they would return to the job.

Guatemalan bus drivers strike over threats

Bus traffic in Guatemala City was brought to a near-standstill January 10 when bus drivers refused to drive to protest extortion and threats by gangs. The bus owners took 42 buses out of circulation. The drivers complain that at least four gangs in the capital city demand up to 4,000 quetzales (US\$507) per week "in exchange for not

killing the drivers," as reported in *Prensa Libre*.

Public transit users have had to rely on buses coming from Jutiapa, 124 km (77 miles) away or private minibuses. One ride can cost from 12 to 15 quetzales (US\$1.50-2.00) in a nation where more than half the population is below the poverty line and 13 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty.

The owners of the buses claim that they have appealed to authorities, but "they got tired of waiting for the Public Ministry and National Civil Police to do something about it, so they decided to suspend the service," according to s21.com.gt.

Chilean dockworkers strike over retroactive pay, workers rights

Workers at the Chilean port of San Antonio began a strike on January 3 over pay and other issues. The main demand is that the workers be paid retroactively for half-hour lunch breaks, an issue that has been festering since November, when the Port Union of Chile sent a letter to the Labor Ministry requesting a hearing. Another crucial demand is that temporary workers be covered in the contract.

Following the lack of response from the Ministry, workers held a one-shift "warning strike" on December 19. Continued government stonewalling led to the decision to walk off the job on January 3.

Other dockworkers then struck in solidarity with the San Antonio workers. Workers walked out at Puerto Angamos, Iquique, Mejillones, Coloso, Antofagasta, Esperanza, Bio Bio and other port cities. Shipments of copper were affected, and the interruption of exports of perishable fruits in the middle of Chile's summer brought calls from the produce industry for government intervention and legal action against the strikers.

In Puerto Angamos, police were dispatched to surround and intimidate strike encampments and accompany strikebreakers. The union claimed that the effort was unsuccessful.

On January 9, the Labor Minister announced that it had reached an agreement to mediate between union and

terminal representatives for two ports, Bio Bio and Los Lagos, and that Puerto Angamos had returned to operation. As of January 12, San Antonio, Chile's main port, and Iquique were still paralyzed, though negotiations were taking place.

Argentine doctors strike against job-and-salary-cutting decree

Doctors and pediatricians at a public hospital in the city of Buenos Aires struck on January 6 to protest a resolution promoted by the right-wing mayor Mauricio Macri that cuts personnel and wages. The measure, Resolution 1657, passed on October 31, reduces the monthly hours of backup doctors, cuts other personnel and reduces wages.

The doctors and pediatricians, part of the Health Ministry's Emergency Medical Attention System (SAME), already carried out a strike December 6-9 over the issue without effect. This time, SAME delegate Laura Schagrodsky told reporters, Buenos Aires health minister Graciela Reybaud prevented the medical workers from meeting in offices over the issue and accused workers of attacking her, a claim Schagrodsky disputes.

Schagrodsky claims that Resolution 1657 will result in a 42 percent reduction in salaries and a 50 percent cut in personnel, as well as the elimination of programs. In a January 9 assembly, the medical workers resolved to continue the strike and to call another assembly at a different hospital on January 14.

Workers demonstrate at New York nuclear power plant

Workers at the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan, New York picketed outside the facility January 9 as their old contract agreement nears expiration. Three days earlier the 395 workers voted to authorize a strike if a new contract is not reached by January 17 with Entergy Corporation.

No details are available as to the nature of contract negotiations between Entergy and the Utility Workers Union of America, Local 1-2. Entergy submitted contingency plans to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on January 7 to operate its Indian point facility. Managers will be trained and recertified to replace striking workers.

In July of last year, Entergy announced it would eliminate 800 jobs at its ten nuclear power plants across the country. 75 jobs are slated to be cut at Indian Point, but none of those positions will affect unionized workers who comprise radiation and chemistry technicians and reactor operators.

The move to slash jobs came after earnings for the

company fell by 55 percent. Nuclear energy companies are facing financial pressure from cheaper natural gas. One of Indian Point's two reactors became the first to operate with an expired license. Federal regulations are allowing the facility to operate while it seeks a 20-year license extension.

University of New Brunswick staff set to strike

Over 800 professors, academic staff, librarians and researchers at the University of New Brunswick are set to go on strike this week after union leaders voted unanimously in favor of a strike deadline last week.

After a December vote by members that was overwhelmingly in favor of strike action, leaders of Association of University of New Brunswick Teachers (AUNBT), which represents staff and faculty at the school, immediately called a truce, but that ended two weeks ago. AUNBT leaders say they are fighting to bring compensation and working conditions in line with other medium-sized universities where teachers are paid as much as 20 percent more.

In the event of a strike, students at the school are seeking to have tuition deadlines extended until an agreement is reached to avoid any possible penalties.

Ontario plastics workers locked out

160 workers employed by Horizon Plastics International in Cobourg, Ontario, east of Toronto, were locked out on January 5 after voting against a tentative contract tabled by their union.

The workers are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) and have been working without a contract since November. With full-time positions having fallen from over 400 at their peak, workers at the Cobourg plant are fighting against a bid by the company to further increase part-time positions. Another issue in dispute is wages. The union had accepted a wage freeze in the last contract and the company is seeking to freeze wages for a further three years.

Despite the lockout, which came as a surprise to workers, the company has continued to operate and ship orders with management doing the work.



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