

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 January 2014

## Longshore strike paralyze Chile

The strike wave that began January 3 at the Chilean port of San Antonio continued this week, spreading to northern ports and to the port city of Valparaiso. Strikes and protests by Chilean longshore workers are stalling fruit and mineral exports. Workers walked out at Puerto Angamos, Iquique, Mejillones, Coloso, Antofagasta, Esperanza, Bio Bio and other port cities.

The lame-duck regime of president Sebastián Piñera has refused to negotiate with the unions representing the strikers, until the workers return to work. At the same time, there have been confrontations between dockworkers and security forces attempting to reopen the ports. On January 14, dockworkers in San Antonio confronted police that were attempting to usher in scab labor across the picket lines.

The government is under pressure by the Chilean Chamber of Commerce (CNC) to open up the ports. CNC leader Ricardo Mewes called on the government to impose the State Domestic Security that would force dock workers back to work.

## Mexican water and sewer workers demand payment of their saving fund

More than 170 water and sewer workers in the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacán state went on strike on January 16, demanding that the city agency pay them over 2 million pesos being held by their savings account, funds collected from their 2013 wages. Three hours into the strike, with 33,000 people without water, the city of Lázaro Cárdenas “lent” the company the money. The agency, Capalac, had argued that if it paid the workers, it ran the risk of not being able to pay regular wages by Friday.

## Argentine refuse collectors on strike

Refuse collectors in Lujan de Cuyo in the Andean province of Mendoza stopped collecting refuse to protest delays in their pay last Wednesday. Many of the protesting workers burnt trash at a major intersection in protest and demanded to see the city’s mayor.

The workers reported that their wages had not been fully paid. In addition they are asking that their monthly salaries be raised from 3,500 to 5,500 pesos.

The refuse collectors originally went on strike on New Year’s week over the back pay. The protest appeared to have been settled until last Wednesday when the protest resumed.

## Mexican health workers protest pay delays

Members of the National Union of Health Department Workers (SNTSS) went on strike Friday in Oaxaca, México. The strike, in solidarity over unpaid wages to some 700 at-will employees, affected more than 700 health facilities including two general hospitals. The workers are owed wages for the second half of December and the first half of January. The Federal Government agreed to respond to workers demands, but has yet to do so.

## Puerto Rican teachers carry out a 48-hour strike over pensions

Throughout Puerto Rico, teachers carried out strikes and protest on Tuesday and Wednesday last week over cuts to their pensions. Thousands of teachers protested at their

schools on what was supposed to be the first day back following the winter break.

Government officials claim that a so-called reform to the pension system approved in December is necessary to save the US colony from financial collapse. The new measure switches teachers from a traditional defined benefit system to a defined contribution plan (like the US 401K.) The latter subjects teachers' retirement to the vagaries of the market for stocks and bonds.

The president of the Puerto Rico's Teachers' Association, Aida Diaz, denounced the pension reform. She noted teachers in Puerto Rico do not get U.S. Social Security and said many would see a decrease in their pension.

"This is the most important fight in our history," she said. "It's about protecting and defending the only source of income we have upon retirement."

### **No contract vote at Port of Baltimore as cooling-off period ends**

The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) did not allow a contract ratification vote January 17, one day before the expiration of a 90-day cooling-off period at the Port of Baltimore. ILA Local 333 president Riker McKenzie would not permit a vote on what port management called an "enhanced best and final offer."

McKenzie cited procedural grounds for not putting the contract to a vote and also declared, "If anybody brings up strike talk, I'll make sure that that strike talk is put to rest immediately."

Last October, workers voted 517 to 25 to reject the port's previous proposal and carried out a three-day strike, that a federal arbitrator declared violated a no-strike clause in the ILA's master agreement.

Port management and politicians have been attempting to intimidate workers by revealing that companies are shifting cargo to other East coast ports. Baltimore is the United States' premier port for the shipment of automobiles.

The ILA had remained quiet about details of the discussions with management. But McKenzie revealed last week that management is seeking to wrest control from the union how job assignments are made at the port.

### **Unionization drive at Delaware Amazon facility fails**

Workers at an Amazon warehouse in Middletown, Delaware voted January 15 against having the International Association of Machinists (IAM) to represent them. A group of electricians and machinists voted 21-6 to reject IAM representation.

The IAM focused on a mere fraction of the 1,500 workers that work at the Delaware facility. John Carr, an IAM spokesman, attempted to downplay the significance of the vote, declaring, workers "understand a successful organizing campaign often requires several election cycles before representation is achieved."

Amazon reacted with force to the IAM campaign, bringing in a law firm that specialized in quashing union drives and held employee meetings to bring the maximum pressure to bear on the workers.

### **Teachers strike at Maritime universities**

With a strike now in its second week at the University of New Brunswick, professors at Mount Allison University in Sackville, Nova Scotia are holding a strike vote this week, having been in a legal strike position for nearly a month.

159 full-time and 53 part-time faculty and other staff at Mount Allison are represented by the Mount Allison Faculty Association and have been working without a contract since last June. Disputed issues include replacement for faculty on leave, pension contributions, and student evaluations of professors. An overriding issue for teachers is the increase in contract and casual teaching work at the expense of tenured positions at the school.

At the same time, 550 full-time professors at the University of New Brunswick remain on picket lines at the Fredericton and Saint John campuses with no negotiations currently scheduled.



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