

Workers Struggles: the Americas

11 February 2014

Latin America

12-hour strike by Mexican university workers over contract noncompliance

Charging the administration of Mexico's Autonomous University of Zacatecas (UAZ) with not carrying out promised provisions in their collective contract, the university's academic personnel union SPAUAZ struck for 12 hours on February 6.

The educators are calling for UAZ to "pay current liabilities for social security, update its plan for *basificación* [converting temporary jobs to permanent status] and job category changes, define job duties and settle debts for contractual benefits," reported *ntrzacatecas.com*.

SPAUAZ has called for dialogue to resolve the conflict, but the UAZ rectory's office has not responded. SPAUAZ already held two limited strike actions on January 29 and February 1.

Meanwhile, the UAZ Workers Syndicate (STUAZ) announced plans to strike on February 15 over the employment of nonunionized workers at the university.

Mexican television workers strike over firings

Unionized and nonunionized workers at the state government-run Oaxacan Radio and Television Corporation (Cortv), in the Mexican city of Oaxaca, Oaxaca began a strike on February 6. The workers accuse the director and two other functionaries of bad management of resources, contempt for the workforce and unjustified firings.

Striking workers blocked access to the installation and demanded the sackings of the director, Rubén Ortega Cajiga, his subdirector of human resources and another administrative official.

Among the complaints made by the workers against the three are the recent firing of a pregnant worker, poor working conditions and the refusal to maintain vehicles driven by workers, while channeling funds into keeping management's four vehicles in good condition.

Strike at Mexican ceramics plant over nonpayment of benefits

Following the failure of talks between management and negotiators for the Workers Confederation of Mexico (CTM), workers at Alpha Cerámica, a bathroom fixtures factory in the city of Mazatecochco, state of Tlaxcala, Mexico, went on strike the night of February 3.

The talks revolved around the benefits of 128 workers that Alpha has not paid. The company claims that due to the poor state of the firm's

finances, it cannot pay out about 8 million pesos (US\$602,500) it owes to the workers. A CTM legal adviser told reporters that the company has not paid into the savings fund, union dues and end-of-year bonus as well as two weeks of salaries.

The adviser, Victor López Hernández, added that "faced with the situation, the CTM has been given the task of investigating the enterprise and we know that the creditors are lying in ambush to charge the debts that Alpha Cerámica has and as a preventive measure before an eventual bankruptcy of the plant, it was decided to go on strike."

"We had three hearings before the local Conciliation and Arbitration Board to try to arrive at an arrangement, but the enterprise did not present any proposal," he pointed out. The only thing Alpha did was promise "to go on partially paying the outstanding debts to the workers in a month or a month and a half."

Talks will continue while the strike is in effect.

Dominican teachers strike to protest nonpayment of salaries

Sixty schools in the Dominican Republic province of Azua did not hold classes on February 6 as teachers maintained their strike to demand the overdue payment of salaries for 28 of their colleagues. The teachers are members of the Dominican Professors Association (ADP).

The 28 teachers have not been paid for eight months, according to ADP provincial president José Altagracia Ramírez. He also mentioned other demands, including the completion of a savings program and the payment of a raise of 15,000 pesos (US\$350) to retired educators.

Strike by Dominican health workers over raise

Professionals and workers for hospitals, policlinics and outpatient facilities of the Dominican Social Security Institute (IDSS) and Public Health Ministry struck on February 3. The striking workers denounced the fact that a recent 10 percent raise only applies to minimum-wage workers and not across the board.

In addition, due to negligence on the part of the IDSS directors, some 9,000 salaried employees have not been paid for the month of January, complained Dr. Rafael Rodríguez Sandoval, president of the IDSS Medical Association.

The Sinatrae nurses union, the IDSS Nursing Association and a number of other unions heeded the strike call. Some 20 public hospitals, 29 policlinics and 65 outpatient facilities were affected by the walkout.

Brazilian postal workers strike over changes to health plan

As of February 6, workers in the state-owned postal operator Brazil Post—known in Brazil as Correios—remained on strike in thirteen states after one week. The workers, members of the Fentec postal workers union federation, are protesting medical charges employees face.

“Brazil Post said the protest was over its Health Card programme, which was supposed to provide financial assistance for medical costs, rather than being a full health care plan,” according to a Post & Parcel report.

Last April, management of postal workers’ health plans was turned over to Postal Saúde, “a nonprofit agency formed in April 2013 to independently operate Brazil Post’s health care plan.”

Calling the industrial action “illegal, abusive, and in contempt of the legal system,” Correios has filed an injunction with the Superior Labor Court (TST) to order the suspension of the strike.

Death of another Brazilian stadium construction worker brings strike call

Following the death of a 55-year-old worker at a World Cup stadium in the Brazilian jungle city of Manaus, workers at the Arena da Amazonia demanded strike action to improve safety and working conditions. The worker, Antônio José Pita Martins, was in a crew disassembling a crane when a piece of iron fell and struck him on the head on February 7.

The Arena da Amazonia is one of twelve stadiums that have been under construction in advance of the World Cup games set to kick off June 12. The government promised to finish them all by the end of 2013, but five are as yet uncompleted, causing increasing pressure to rush construction and increasing the likelihood of accidents.

After the accident, a union official told reporters, “We have to guarantee the workers’ rights and their safety. Nobody will get in on Monday.”

So far seven workers have died on World Cup stadium work sites. Apart from one who died from a heart attack, they have all perished from accidents. Three of the deaths occurred at Manaus.

Argentine airport workers strike, protest salaries, conditions

Outsourced workers at the Ezeiza international airport serving Buenos Aires struck and held protests on February 1 and 2 to demand improvements in their wages and working conditions. The workers blocked access routes, slowing entry and exit of passengers.

The workers’ representatives had held a meeting with the Employment Minister that failed to reach an agreement. About 900 workers are affected.

Protesting workers complained of their workdays, usually seven days a week with a day off every 15 days. Though ostensibly under representation, they complained about neglect by their union. One protester told reporters that their insecure status “doesn’t leave us with genuine union representation. We are obligatory members of unions that are accomplices of those who exploit us.”

On February 5, baggage handlers held a surprise strike over the continuing impasse. They had held one previously on January 15.

Barbuda council employees protest late wages

About 150 employees of the Barbuda Council on the island of Barbuda—the smaller island of the two-island nation Antigua and Barbuda—picketed the Council on February 3. The workers were protesting the nonpayment of salaries, in some cases for up to 15 weeks.

The Barbuda Council “is a local authority that manages day-to-day internal affairs on the island of Barbuda. The council administers and regulates agriculture, forestry, public health, public utilities, and roads. It also raises and collects revenue to meet expenses incurred in the performance of its functions,” according to Wikipedia.

The protesters were split on the cause of the delays. One group, the larger of the two, demanded that the council pay up. The smaller group, aligned with the opposition Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party (ABLP), attempted to convince people that the problem lay with the ruling United Progressive Party (UPP) central government, which it claimed has been reckless in borrowing, bringing public sector debt to EC\$4 billion (US\$1.48 billion) for Antigua and Barbuda’s population of barely 82,000.

At one point a confrontation ensued between the two groups, resulting in one arrest.

The United States

Oregon teachers strike after bargaining fails

Teachers in Medford, Oregon walked out on strike February 6, after a 21-hour negotiating session failed to reach an agreement. Negotiators for the school district and the Medford Education Association (MEA) have failed to reach an agreement on salaries, health insurance, retirement issues and workloads.

The two sides were to have resumed bargaining over the weekend, but the school district, in reaction to the strike, immediately cancelled classes through February 10. It plans to open the school the following day with strikebreakers and security guards.

According to reports, the MEA has indicated a willingness to accept the districts cost-of-living increase, but the two sides are divided over working conditions and retirement incentives. Among the workplace issues are preparatory time for teachers and class load as well as class size.

Canada

Media advertisers locked out in Montreal

Around 20 advertising salespeople employed by online media publisher, Trader Corporation in Montreal, Quebec, were locked out last week with no warning after workers rejected the latest contract offer by a large majority.

Salespeople at Trader have been fighting for a first contract under the Syndicat des employés et employés professionnels-les et de bureau (SEPB) to try and win gains in wages and working conditions. The company had given no indication of its intention to lock out workers, only saying that its latest offer, which did not even include a standard commission plan, was the “best possible”.

Trader Corporation, which publishes popular sites and print material for the automotive market, was recently found in violation of Quebec’s Labour Code for unilaterally reducing the terms of payment to its employees.



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