

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 February 2014

Latin America

Mexican technical school workers and students strike

107 workers and their student supporters at the Alvarado Technological School in Boca del Río, Veracruz, Mexico, are continuing the strike they began February 4. Their main demand is the dismissal of the school's director, Ramses Alejandro Galindo Cota, whom the striking workers and students accuse of irregularities and mismanagement.

The workers' union director, Roberto Peñaloza, alleged that over the last six years, Galindo Cota has created false and inflated billings for various services at a cost of millions of pesos to the institution.

Peñaloza also denounced the subsecretary of State Middle and Higher Education, Denise Uscanga, for collusion with Galindo Cota. The protesters have called on the state governor to intervene.

Mexican judicial workers return to work after one-week strike

On February 11, workers at the Michoacán, Mexico judicial branch headquarters resumed working after agreeing to a deal struck between the SUTASPIEM judicial workers union director and the judicial branch presiding magistrate.

Some 1,100 workers walked out February 4 after receiving no response from management over various issues including salary increases, training, contract violations, security and hygiene, labor conditions and the payment of insurance. The parties held talks in the offices of the Conciliation and Arbitration Board.

Workers decided to accept a 3.5 percent salary increase, a 1.2 percent rise in benefits and a monthly payment of 530 pesos (USD40.00) per worker for medical expenses.

Partial strikes by Salvadoran microbus drivers over gang threats

Two bus routes in El Salvador were paralyzed last week by partial strikes in response to gang extortion.

In the northern municipality of Chalatenango, Route 141 drivers began a two-day strike on February 12 to bring attention to threats made by gang members, who extort money from drivers and ticket collectors. Gangs have declared that they are going to raise their demands.

In Mejicanos, a suburb of San Salvador, drivers on Route 33B stopped work February 13, the day after a ticket collector was killed.

48-hour strike by Puerto Rican health workers over stalled negotiations

On February 11, members of the Nurses and Health Employees Union (ULEES) at the San Lucas Hospital in Ponce, Puerto Rico began a two-day strike to protest the lack of progress in contract talks. ULEES represents about 200 workers in the cardiovascular unit.

The strike and picketing began at the entrance to the Cardiovascular Tower, but demonstrators did not block the entrance. The workers told reporters that the hospital has not negotiated in good faith since the contract expired in 2006. ULEES executive director Radamés Quiñones Aponte claimed that 95 percent of hospital clients supported the action.

Argentine public registry workers strike over pay issues

Workers in the public registry in Argentina's Misiones province struck February 10 over a range of issues. A delegate of the striking workers, Norberto Godoy, said that the workers were tired of the government treating the workers "like nobodies" and "pulling our legs."

Demands included the payment of delayed wages and overtime and the conversion of short-term contract workers to full-time status. Regarding upcoming parity talks scheduled for March, Godoy complained that "everything goes up and the employees always stay below the poverty line." He added that the 25 percent raise that the provincial government was going to propose for state workers "is insufficient and they will not accept it."

Job actions by Argentine soccer club players and employees over unpaid salaries

On February 11, members of the soccer team Huracán of Argentina's Comodoro Rivadavia province showed up at the practice field in the morning but said they would not practice until they were paid two months of back salaries. One player told reporters that some of the players did not have money to buy food.

Management did not show up in the morning, and it was not until the evening that the players, with the promise of payment, began practice.

Club president Ariel Vidal told reporters, "We aren't the only ones with problems." According to Diario Jornada, two other teams in the province are behind in paying their players, though those players have not yet resorted to job actions.

Meanwhile, in the city of Avellaneda, in greater Buenos Aires, nonplayer employees of the Big Five soccer team

Independiente struck February 12 over the nonpayment of about 2,800,000 pesos (USD360,000) in back overdue wages. The workers demonstrated outside the club's stadium as well as at the club headquarters.

The action was taken following the lack of response by club president Javier Cantero to the workers' demands. Cantero later claimed that there had been a 72-hour delay, but the wages would be paid.

Work stoppage by Uruguayan construction workers over death of coworker

On February 13, Uruguay's SUNCA construction workers union called a work stoppage from 9 am to 1 pm to protest the death of a worker in the southern town of Toledo. Gonzalo Rivero, 35 and the father of 5, was working on a highway when he was crushed by a falling concrete column.

Construction workplace accidents are a regular occurrence in Uruguay, accounting for over 180 worker deaths and thousands of injuries in the last 20 years. SUNCA's response has been to call partial strikes—usually of four hours' duration—and appeal to the nation's parliament to pass a “law of penal responsibility to end the impunity of the offending enterprises,” in the words of a SUNCA communiqué.

After being passed in the lower house, the proposed legislation has stalled in the legislature after a bloc of ruling Broad Front senators were able to postpone voting until March 12.

Seven-week strike by Antiguan quarry workers

On February 12, workers at the Bendals Quarry on the Caribbean island of Antigua ended a strike they had begun on January 6. The workers, according to a January 30 *Antigua Observer* report, struck “for grievances including a lack of protective gear and safe drinking water while on the job, three months outstanding overtime pay, and tardiness on the part of the Ministry of Public Works to properly fill vacant positions.”

Meetings between Ralph Potter, Senior Industrial Relations Officer of the Antigua Trades & Labour Union (AT&LU), the Public Works Department (PWD) and officials at the Labour Department resulted in a promise to resolve the issues. Based on that promise, the AT&LU called the workers back to the job February 10. However, when they arrived at the quarry, the water had not arrived. Neither had the keys to the machinery and proper working gear.

The Observer reported that they “were unable to work due to what appears to be a miscommunication” on the part of the PWD. Meanwhile, talks continued “to ensure that both parties would have a clear understanding of the recommendations made.”

The United States

Port of Baltimore longshoremen reject contract

Members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) at the Port of Baltimore voted 416 to 140 for the second time to reject management's “last, best and final” offer February 11. Longshoremen voted down an agreement last fall and carried through a three-day strike. Earlier this month a federal arbitrator determined the strike was illegal and leveled a \$3.8 million fine against the union.

This led the ILA international to circulate a letter among members of Local 333 encouraging a no vote against the recent contract that was motivated from the standpoint of protecting the interests of the bureaucracy. Dennis Daggett, president of the ILA's Atlantic Coast District, made clear a no vote would not mean another strike, but would put the union in a “better position” to reduce the \$3.8 million fine through negotiations.

“I believe,” wrote Daggett, “that if the final offer is accepted by the Local 333 membership, STA and its member companies will proceed with enforcing the award against Local 333's treasury and your future dues money, which obviously will be financially devastating to Local 333. On the other hand, if you reject the offer, Local 333 will likely be in a better position to deal with the arbitrator's award.”

Canada

Windsor poised for salt strike

Nearly 250 mine workers employed by Canadian Salt Company in Windsor, Ontario are set to go on strike this week if a deal isn't reached before a Tuesday strike deadline when the current contract expires.

The workers affected, who are members of the newly formed union giant Unifor, are employed in two salt mines in the Windsor area which, among other products, provides rock salt for Ontario roads in winter. According to union negotiators, the issue of wages has not yet been dealt with, while the major issue of pensions has put contract talks at an impasse.

The city of Windsor has reportedly been stockpiling thousands of tons of salt in various depots in anticipation of a possible strike and cities across the province are already experiencing salt shortages due to an unusually harsh winter.



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