

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 February 2014

Latin America

## Strike by Mexican hospital workers for overdue pay

Doctors, nurses and aides at the General Hospital of Cabo San Lucas, Baja California Sur, Mexico struck February 22 over delays of their paychecks by the state government. A few doctors and nurses who are paid through the federal government continued working.

One doctor, who has not been paid for her last nine quincenas (bimonthly pay periods), told *El Sudcaliforniano* that she did not understand “why they don’t give a truthful answer since when we conferred with the secretary of health...he assured us that they would be resolving the situation quickly; however, the only thing they have done is throw the ball from one to the other.”

## Mexican higher education workers strike for raise and benefits

On February 18, in Zacatecas, Mexico, about 2,300 members of the Autonomous University of Zacatecas Academic Personnel Union (SPAUAZ) voted 74 percent in favor of a strike to begin the following day. The vote was called owing to the rector’s non-response to a list of demands, especially one for around 876 million pesos (66 million USD) owed to the state workers’ social security and retirement systems, on a petition.

In the state of Sonora, teachers at the National Professional Technical Education College Academic Workers Union (CONALEP) began a strike February 19 over wages and benefits. The teachers’ union covers over 600 academic workers, who teach around 13,000 students.

The educators went on strike to push for a pay and benefits rise of at least 25 percent and to emphasize their rejection of the government’s offer of 3.2 percent. Union director Ramona Risk Fontes told reporters that CONALEP Sonora has the lowest pay rate of higher education and that 25 percent is the minimum needed to address that status.

She added, however, “We are disposed to lower [demands] a little, but that 25 percent permits us to compete with other tabulations of other high-level institutions. There are many clauses that can be revised to achieve this increase and arrive at an agreement, but we don’t see much hope.” She concluded, “We have to confide in the state government. We hope it does its duty to the teachers and students.”

## Salvadoran bus drivers stop work to demand better security, wages

Following the firing of bullets by alleged gang members at a coworker, bus drivers on El Salvador’s route 53-D between the towns of Sonsonate and Nahuizalco refused to drive their vehicles February 22. About 40 buses that ply the route were idled, blocking access to critical points along highways and slowing traffic.

The driver, who was shot at on the night of February 20, managed to escape unharmed.

Attacks by gang members demanding “protection” money from bus drivers and fare collectors are regular occurrences in Central American countries, where inequality and unemployment are extreme. Incidents in other Latin American nations such as Argentina [see below] occur as well.

“Apart from security, the drivers took advantage of the suspension of labors to demand improvements in salaries from the owners and that they do not deduct from them when they are victims of assaults or collection of rent on the part of some gang members,” reported *La Prensa Gráfica*.

## Argentine bus drivers strike over violent gang attacks on drivers

Four municipal bus lines in the Buenos Aires provincial cities of Quilmes and Florencio Varela were paralyzed on February 21 after two attacks on drivers by gang members last week. Commuters were obliged to find alternate means of transport as the drivers struck to demand that authorities provide better security for drivers.

On the night of February 18 a driver was attacked by two young men who cut off one of his fingers. Later that night, on a different route, two robbers beat a driver, kicked him repeatedly in the face and shot up the roof of the bus before leaving.

## Limited strikes by Uruguayan toll road workers to protest stalled negotiations

Toll workers opened the gates along Uruguay’s expressways from 10 am to 2 pm February 22 to protest the lack of progress in salary negotiations. The striking workers handed out fliers to drivers as they passed through. The workers’ union told workers to repeat the action on February 23 from 7 pm to midnight.

Union director Richard Canavese told reporters that the decision to

intensify actions was due to three unsuccessful meetings which did not result in management budging on salaries.

### Paraguayan resident doctors strike to demand repeal of ruling

Some 500 resident doctors in Paraguay's public health system struck February 21 to demand the withdrawal of a ruling issued by the Health Ministry. Most of the doctors work at the National Hospital of Itauguá. The doctors walked to protest the imposition of the ministry's "rural internship" directive.

Under the terms of the three-week-old ruling, a doctor is sent to a city in the interior of the country for one year. "This internship, supposedly," reported *abc.com.py*, "is a requirement for the authorization of the specialty" that the doctor wishes to pursue. "Where and under what conditions will depend exclusively on the ministry, said [Hernán] Bolo," one of the affected doctors. Bolo called the measure "arbitrary and dictatorial" and claimed that it would leave the resident without the possibility of achieving his or her specialty this year. A tripartite meeting the day before including the Labor Ministry failed to resolve the issue.

The doctors marched to the Health Ministry building, where some nurses were holding their own protest. The nurses, who treat patients with kidney problems, were demanding improvements in the Nephrology Institute, where they administer dialysis. The nurses denounced the authorities, saying that they had "abandoned" them.

### The United States

### Alaska fuel workers strike over harassment

About a dozen workers at Delta Western's fuel dock in the Aleutian Island's port town of Unalaska, walked off the job February 16 to protest harassment and retaliation against their attempts to unionize with the Inland Boatman's Union. Workers charge management with having threatened to take away retirement benefits and adverse working conditions against anyone who supported unionization.

Workers returned to work at the end of the day and the following day, unfair labor practices charges were filed with the National Labor Relations Board. Exact details as to what led workers to ultimately attempt to organize are not clear. A representative of the Boatman's union said it was "company culture," adding, "The company itself has not taken responsibility for the ongoing violations."

Delta Western is a leading distributor of petroleum products throughout Alaska. Back in 2007, Unalaska workers attempted unsuccessfully to organize against the company with the Teamsters and later with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The Inland Boatman's Union, with whom workers are currently attempting to organize, is a division of the ILWU.

### Oscar statuette makers face anti-labor assault

Workers who manufacture the gold Oscar statuettes for Hollywood's Academy Awards have been in a dispute with their employer, R.S.Owens & Company in Chicago since late in 2012. At that time the company was acquired by Canadian company St. Regis Crystal. Shortly afterward, 251 workers, members of Teamsters Local 743, were laid off by the new owners. Then, 80 percent of the fired workers were rehired by St. Regis.

Emma Moreno, a representative of Local 743 said that St. Regis has since refused to recognize workers' seniority rights or benefits under contract before the acquisition. Also, \$120,000 in vacation pay is under threat. St. Regis is seeking to operate under an open shop agreement, according to Moreno, calling the company's actions a "direct attack" on the entire American labor movement.

A demonstration was planned outside R.S.Owens' facility for February 17. The union called it off after talks last Thursday between the Teamsters Local and St. Regis. Another meeting was scheduled for March 6, 4 days after the Academy Awards.

Moreno said she was hoping to elicit a public show of support from this year's Oscar nominees.

### Canada

### Nova Scotia home care workers look to strike

Over 1,100 continuing-care workers across the province of Nova Scotia could begin strike action as early as the end of this week after 14 bargaining units completed voting last week which returned solidly in favor of a strike.

700 continuing care workers with the Victoria Order of Nurses (VON) across the province voted overwhelmingly last week to reject the company's final offer and another 440 care workers in the central part of the province voted nearly unanimously in favor of a strike. The workers are represented by the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU/NUPGE) and have been working without a contract since March of 2012.

Continuing care workers assist patients in their homes and are seeking wage parity with similarly trained workers in hospitals and long-term care facilities who can make several dollars more an hour.



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