

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 March 2014

Latin America

One-week strike by Mexican university workers over contract breaches

Workers at the Autonomous University of Querétaro (UAQ), Mexico walked off the job on March 1 over the rector's noncompliance with and violations of the collective contract. These included the failure to "basify," or give permanent status to, over 400 workers with over 10 years of service and to finance end-of-year and other festivities.

Although Laura Leyva Saavedra, secretary general of the workers' union, STEUAQ, claimed that the strike was more "for dignity and respect" than over economic issues, raises in wages and benefits were included among the demands.

UAQ rector Gilberto Herrera Ruiz passed the blame for the breaches of contract onto the failure of the state's governor, José Eduardo Calzada Roviroso, to deliver on his campaign promise to double the budget for the UAQ.

The strike was ended on March 7 when workers voted in assembly to accept increases in salary of 4 percent and 2.4 percent for benefits. They also voted to accept 50 "basifications" and other unspecified benefits. The government, according to the proposed agreement, will provide 2.5 million pesos (US\$190,000) as an "annual administrative stimulus" to the university.

The vote was 614 in favor, 26 against and 60 abstentions. STEUAQ, UAQ and state government reps will attend tripartite arbitration and negotiations to sign the agreement.

National strike by Argentine teachers over wages

Teachers across Argentina struck on March 6 and 7 in response to a call by five educators' unions, most notably the CTERA, which is the largest, containing over a third of the nation's teacher workforce.

The teachers had been offered a 31 percent wage raise over 18 months, but with their basic monthly wage equal to 3,400 pesos (US\$433) and with the soaring inflation rate, "teachers' salaries will be falling further and further behind prices" if they accepted it, according to a teachersolidarity.com report.

The government had called earlier for "obligatory conciliation" talks, and some unions complied, but CTERA, UEPC (Educators Union of the Province), UNTER (Education Workers Union) and some other unions reported high adhesion to the stoppage in Buenos Aires, Mendoza, Jujuy, Tucumán, Río Negro and other provinces.

In Buenos Aires, where millionaire mayor Mauricio Macri has attacked public schools and pushed a privatization agenda, the CTERA-aligned SUTEBA and the FEB confederation announced that they would extend

their strike through March 11. Others, including the UDA (Teacher Union of Argentina) and AMET technical school union as well as private school union, went back to work.

Brazilian trash collectors, street sweepers strike for higher wages, benefits

Trash collectors and street sweepers in Rio de Janeiro began a strike on March 1. The action coincided with the yearly Carnival celebrations, which generated massive piles of trash, garbage, discarded costumes and party leftovers.

On March 3, after a meeting between the municipal trash collection service Comlurb and the trash collectors union, the parties announced that they had signed an agreement to put an end to the strike. The pact, covering 15,000 workers, would raise total wages and "unhealthiness" pay to 1,224.70 reais, or US\$523 per month.

Striking workers, however, did not accept the accord. One worker, protest organizer Bruno Lima, told notimerica.com, "Nothing was negotiated. The union signed it for itself. They didn't call an assembly to debate the guidelines with the workers." Lima added, "We can't take any more. The salaries are very low, about 900 reais (US\$385), and conditions are terrible."

Confrontations, both with police and with scab workers, have occurred. On the first day of the strike, military police launched tear gas at some 500 street sweepers who had tried to enter a parade area. In some neighborhoods, police escorted non-striking trash collectors, claiming that they had been threatened by strikers.

The striking workers have said that they will continue with the strike until their demands, including full payment of overtime pay for weekends, are met.

Limited protest by Grenadian teachers over back pay

Teachers on the southwest Caribbean island nation of Grenada protested delays in the payment of their salaries on March 5. The protest was of a symbolic character, consisting of the wearing of red armbands or T-shirts of their union, the Grenada Union of Teachers (GUT), while continuing to work.

In January, GUT president Lyden Lewis ruled out strike action, instead suggesting the wearing of armbands. He said of the protest, "Today, we have seen good response and we expect better tomorrow." A government statement said that an update would be made on March 17 as to when remaining payments would be made. The GUT is calling for the payments to be made on March 12. Lewis responded, "If it's not done by that time, we will definitely heighten our process."

Grenada, with a population of 109,600, faced with a national debt of

EC\$2.4 billion (US\$889 million), has been seeking an agreement for a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) with the International Monetary Fund. The SAP would include a three-year wage freeze for public employees and increased taxes. Economic Affairs Minister Oliver Joseph has threatened layoffs if the three main public sector unions—the GUT, the Technical and Allied Workers Union (TAWU) and the Public Workers Union (PWU)—do not sign a memorandum agreeing to the SAP.

Bermudian bus and ferry workers protest antistrike measure

Some 200 bus and ferry workers in the Bermudian capital of Hamilton marched on Parliament on March 5 to protest the proposed declaration of public transport as an essential service. The protesters, members of the Bermuda Industrial Union (BIU), fear that the amendment would outlaw strikes and otherwise infringe on labor rights.

The Islands of Bermuda, a British overseas territory in the North Atlantic with a population of 64,000, has experienced a number of industrial actions, including wildcat strikes, in the last few weeks. In February, BIU members struck for three days to protest the discharge of five hotel employees, and Marine and Ports staff held a four-hour walkout over complaints against management.

When the protesters reached the House of Assembly, BIU president Chris Furbert declared that public transport was not “a matter of life and limb” and called the amendment “a form of union-busting.” However, when workers heckled Premier Craig Cannonier, who addressed the crowd after leaving the House of Assembly, Furbert told them to “show respect.”

Since then, the BIU called its workers back to work and has been meeting with the government.

Antiguan media workers strike against pay delays, working conditions

Media workers for Antigua and Barbuda’s state-run ABS Radio and Television struck on March 7. The workers, members of the Antigua Trades and Labour Union (AT&LU), picketed the ABS headquarters in the capital, St. John, and later in front of the parliament building.

The primary issue is the payment of a raise that was promised to the workers in 2009 by the then-opposition United Progressive Party, which took power following elections that year. Other wage demands include a current salary increase and risk allowance. Further demands concern working conditions: malfunctioning air conditioners, bathrooms in substandard condition, old and inferior equipment and vehicles among others.

About 35 of the 55 ABS workers participated in the walkout, not enough to cripple operations or stop scheduled programming. Though AT&LU shop steward Jermaine Kentish expressed surprise and disappointment—and accused some non-striking workers of “backtracking”—he told reporters that the workers would not be dissuaded until they had gotten their due.

The United States

Contract ratification at Lockheed Martin

A new four-year contract covering 4,700 workers at Lockheed Martin plants in Georgia, California, Mississippi and other locations was ratified March 2 after being recommended by the leadership of the International Association of Machinists. The new agreement provides 2.5 percent annual wage increases in the second, third and fourth year of the agreement, along with a \$2,700 signing bonus and a three percent lump sum payout to be administered in the first 60 days after ratification. The agreement also increases the company contribution to the pension plan from \$88 to \$95 per month and the company will continue to pay 87 percent of health care premiums.

But the major concession by the IAM to management is that new workers hired after March 3, 2014 will be shunted away from the traditional HMO plan covering current workers and be forced to accept an inferior plan.

Lockheed Martin, the giant defense contractor, reported an 8.6 percent increase in profits to almost \$3 billion in 2013, despite flat or declining sales. The only dip in 2013 profits was in the fourth quarter when the company paid out severance packages as a result of the closing of four plants that eliminated 4,000 jobs.

Mississippi legislature considering anti-worker bills

The Mississippi legislature is advancing bills that would further reinforce the state’s long right-to-work status. Senate Bill 2653 would restrict mass picketing of a residence or place of business where it interferes with the movement in and out of the premises or involves violence.

Senate Bill 2473 would make it illegal to coerce any business into staying neutral in a unionization election and allow the employer to sue anyone involved in such a coercion. Senate Bill 2797 requires legislative approval any time a labor contract agrees to wave particular rights as part of a “labor peace” agreement.

Canada

Vancouver truckers strike giant port facility

Four hundred truck drivers, members of Unifor’s Vancouver Container Trucker’s Association, went on strike Monday at Vancouver Port Metro, Canada’s largest port. The workers have been without a contract since June 2012.

They join about 1,000 non-union truckers who have been out on strike since February 26. The job action Monday by the unionized workers comes after they overwhelmingly rejected a tentative agreement placed before them Saturday by Unifor officials. In that vote, 98 percent voted to turn down the offer.

Union negotiators issued a statement the previous Thursday noting that they were “pleased” with the agreement reached with a mediator and encouraged the membership to accept the deal. However, after the massive rejection by the membership, Vince McGarrigle, the now chastened Unifor area director stated “the immediate economics of the situation for our members is just intolerable. That’s why they gave us the result they gave today.” Why the union was “pleased” to present to its members an intolerable contract, McGarrigle did not say.

Over the past week, Unifor officials had done everything in their power to prevent their membership from joining the striking non-union workers. Even after the Unifor members entered into a legal strike position last

Thursday allowing them to join the ongoing job action by non-union workers, union officials held back from authorizing strike action in order to extend negotiations with Vince Ready, a mediator requested by the union and appointed by the federal government.

Both union and non-union workers are demanding a pay hike, standardized rates to prevent hard-pressed drivers from undercutting one another and an end to bottlenecks at the port, which increase idling time and reduce the number of loads truckers can transport in a day. Unionized truckers earn only \$15.59 per hour, a rate \$8 per hour less than the average in the British Columbia trucking industry as a whole. Non-union truckers, who are paid by the load, need to access five loads per day to make ends meet but, due to the bottlenecks, average only three.



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