

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 March 2014

## Latin America

### Strike at Mexican university over contract violations enters third week

On March 14, a strike by workers at the University of Sonora, or Unison, based in Hermosillo, Mexico, completed its second week. The University of Sonora Workers and Employees Union (STEUS) called the walkout February 28 to protest violations of the collective contract.

Unison campuses throughout the state of Sonora—in Caborca, Santa Ana, Nogales, Ciudad Obregón and Navojoa—were struck as well. Some 30,000 students attend Unison campuses.

The vote for the strike was 994 to 458, with 12 abstentions. It followed a hearing before the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board (JLCyA) over the administration's noncompliance with clauses in the contract regarding job security, labor conditions, the granting of permanent positions for union members, recoupment for work materials and retirement. STEUS secretary general Modesto Torres Valerio also mentioned the inadequate condition of some of the buildings.

Five days into the strike, and faced with the Unison administration's refusal to respond to the demands, Torres Valerio told reporters that STEUS was "open to negotiation" and willing to lift the strike if the rector would respect the contract. He also issued a plea to students—some of whom have demonstrated against the strike—to talk to the union about the issues.

A March 13 meeting at the JLCyA failed to reach an agreement. Torres Valerio said that STEUS would continue the strike, and that the union would ask the governor, Guillermo Padrés Elías, to intervene to bring Unison back to the table.

### 48-hour strike by Mexican educators to protest education reform

On March 11, teachers from section 22 of the CNTE education workers' confederation blocked 37 highway intersections and formed a cordon around the legislative building in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The actions were part of a 48-hour strike to protest education reforms.

At a CNTE encampment, a union spokesman denounced the federal Education Reform, saying that "for us it is a dead letter, because it damages the rights and labor conquests through 26 years of struggle of our democratic movement." However, he promoted CNTE's own Plan for the Transformation of Education for Oaxaca (PTEO), which he said seeks to "harmonize" with the state's Education Law.

At Isthmus of Tehuantepec, 11,000 teachers barricaded interstate bridges, stalling traffic. In other states, among them Michoacán, Guerrero and Chiapas, CNTE members carried out related actions.

### Guatemalan health workers strike over delays in pay, unsigned contracts, supply shortages

A strike by health workers in Guatemala is still ongoing and has grown since it began on February 28. The original strike by about 200 health workers, affiliated with an organization called the National Struggle Front (Frente Nacional de Lucha, FNL), was joined on March 11 by workers in the National Laboratory and doctors and nurses in hospitals in San Benito (Petén department) and Cuilapa (Santa Rosa department).

The Guatemalan public health sector is plagued by insufficient supplies and medicine. These shortages include vaccines for hepatitis B and pneumonia as well as reagents and test kits for HIV, H1N1 (influenza A), dengue, malaria, rotavirus and other maladies. The minister of health denies the shortages.

In addition, workers have faced delays in payment of their wages and uncertainty from unsigned contracts. In Cuilapa, for example, more than 850 workers have not received wages for two months. Many of them are under temporary contracts that the health ministry has not signed. A union spokesman told *Prensa Libre*, "We want an exact date to sign the contracts and the date of payment of the salary for the colleagues." So far, the Health Ministry has not responded.

### Puerto Rican teachers approve strike against pension reform

Last week, members of the Teachers Federation of Puerto Rico voted to approve a strike if the island's Supreme Court upholds a pension reform law passed last December. The reform, Law 160, changes the calculation for pensions, drastically reducing compensation for retirees. The law has been challenged in the high court, and teachers' unions are awaiting the decision.

Teachers held protest demonstrations during the legislative debates on Law 160, and in January they held a two-day walkout following its passage. So far, the Teachers Association, which is larger than the Teachers Federation, has not voted on strike action.

### Panamanian construction workers demonstrate against stalled negotiations

Members of the Panamanian construction workers' union, Suntracs, picketed the Panamanian Chamber of Construction (Capac) for three days last week over stalled tripartite negotiations over the next four-year contract. Union officials have said that if the negotiations do not reach an agreement soon, Suntracs will call a national strike.

Talks have been going on with the involvement of the Ministry of Work and Labor Development (Mitradel) since last October, and agreement has

been reached on 102 of 152 clauses. Salary and benefit issues are the main holdups. Suntracs is calling for a 50 percent wage raise, which, for example, would raise the monthly base pay for electricians from US\$774 to US\$1,160. Other sticking points include a special raise for work on “megaprojects” and unspecified benefit demands.

Suntracs submitted a petition to Mitradel on February 24. The same day, Capac broke off negotiations. Although Suntracs has threatened a national strike, union secretary Héctor Hurtado told laestrella.com.pa, “Our objective is to return to the negotiating table.”

### **Brazilian trash workers’ strike ends**

Trash collectors and street sweepers in Rio de Janeiro returned to work March 9 after an eight-day strike over wages and benefits. The strike had broken out at the beginning of the month during Carnival festivities.

The agreement between the workers’ union and the city street cleaning service Comlurb increased the base monthly wage from 803 reais (US\$339) to 1,100 reais (US\$464), short of the original demand of 1,200 reais (US\$507). Daily meal allowances will rise from 12 reais (US\$5.06) to 20 reais (US\$8.44).

#### **United States**

### **Washington state health care workers launch three-day strike**

More than 250 workers at Behavior Health Resources (BHR) in three counties surrounding Olympia, Washington, launched a three-day strike March 14 over failed contract talks. Negotiations between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199NW and management have failed to produce an agreement since the old contract agreement expired one year ago.

The SEIU gave up \$400,000 in wages in the last contract and agreed to pay \$300,000 more for health care in its most recent proposal to help the ailing mental health and addiction service provider. But BHR rejected its offer as insufficient, opening the way to last weekend’s strike.

Starting in 2002, BHR went through a number of mergers and expansions to encompass Thurston, Mason and Grays Harbor Counties; it provides services to 10,000 patients. But the company has suffered financial problems and has made appeals to the public to help cover critical services. The Better Business Bureau cited BHR as lacking in one of its standards for Charity Accountability, charging the company “does not provide a financial review that includes total revenue; program, fundraising and administrative expense totals; and ending net assets.”

### **Nurses strike Illinois hospital over staffing, working conditions**

More than 20 nurses at Maryville Behavioral Health Hospital in Des Plaines, Illinois, carried through a five-day strike beginning March 10 to draw attention to unsafe staffing levels. Nurses dispute hospital management’s claim that patient-to-staff ratios are 12-to-1, claiming it is closer to 20-to-1.

Last week, the Illinois Nurses Association, which represents the striking nurses, revealed that during October and November of last year alone, there were 16 incidents in which nurses and other hospital personnel

involved in patient care were “hit, kicked and choked.”

“We have constant fights, riots, injuries,” a Maryville nurse told the *Chicago Daily Herald*. “How is being kicked, spit on, or urine thrown in your face safe? I love working with Maryville, but I want it to be safe.”

In 2012, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued seven citations against the hospital. One was considered “serious” and exposed workers “to workplace violence hazards...especially when engaging with escalating patients.”

Management has rejected nurses’ demands, pointing out it lost \$4 million in the last fiscal year and is currently running a \$3 million deficit. “If we had additional dollars to do so, we would,” said the hospital’s executive director, Sister Catherine Ryan. “We’re not going to have more revenue after the strike.”

#### **Canada**

### **Government targets Vancouver truckers’ strike**

The strike by 400 unionized and 1,000 non-unionized truckers at the country’s busiest port in Vancouver, B.C., is under pressure from an intergovernmental plan to bring it to an end following the release of the plan last week.

The 14-point plan was drawn up by the provincial and federal governments and released last Thursday. Both the union representing truckers, Unifor, and the United Truckers Association, which represents 1,000 non-unionized owner-operators, have said they are reviewing the plan but have not yet responded publicly to the proposal.

The concerted government effort to end the strike comes after union members, who have been working without a contract since June 2012, rejected a tentative contract recommended to them by their union last week. The truckers are fighting to end costly wait times at the port and an increase in pay to rates approaching a living wage.



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