

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 June 2014

Latin America

Mexican clothing workers strike to protest illegal firings

Workers walked off the job at Mex Mode, a clothing factory in Atlixco, Puebla, Mexico June 18 to protest the firing of four workers and the refusal of the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board to recognize the new executive committee of the Independent Workers Syndicate, the union representing the workers.

The board has refused to acknowledge the results of the election, claiming that there were irregularities. The fired workers are the general secretary of the executive committee and three other union officials, who were discharged June 17 at the end of the workday.

The Movimiento Antorchista, (Torch Movement), an organization that supports the workers, protested outside the factory and blocked its entry. The group is calling on the state government “to intervene and stop the aggressions of the enterprise against the workers,” according to a report in the Heraldo de Puebla.

Mexican teachers strike to demand reinstatement of suspended colleagues

About 120 teachers, administrative personnel and support staff at the Escuela Secundaria No. 7 (Middle School No. 7) in Ciudad Victoria, capital of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, stopped work June 18. The striking teachers demanded the reinstatement of five of their colleagues, who were suspended when a student died from injuries sustained in a beating by classmates.

The student, 12-year-old Héctor Alejandro Méndez Ramírez, was slammed against a wall May 19, causing fatal head trauma. The case shocked the nation and brought demands to end bullying, which affects about 40 percent of students in Mexico. The authorities suspended a social worker, a prefect, a librarian, a subdirector and a teacher who was on the playground when the tragedy occurred.

The salaries of the five were suspended as well. The school staff decided to work under protest on June 2 and to demand the reinstatement and payment of their colleagues. The authorities did not respond, so the teachers struck.

On June 19, following talks between teacher representatives and the Education Secretary’s office, the staff went back to work. A teachers’ delegation spokesperson would not give details of the agreement, but only said that the harassment of his colleagues would end.

Puerto Rican public-sector unions approve strike to protest austerity legislation

On June 17, members of two public-sector unions—the Puerto Rico Aqueduct & Sewer Authority (Prasa) and Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (Prepa)—voted to strike over legislation being pushed by politicians to resolve the island’s fiscal crisis on the backs of the working class. The “fiscal emergency” legislation would impose drastic cuts to public workers’ jobs, wages, pensions and labor rights.

The unions have staged a number of protest actions, including

marches, demonstrations and one-day stoppages. The legislation, which Governor Alejandro García Padilla has strongly promoted, has gone ahead nonetheless.

Following the vote, the union members marched and demonstrated at the Plaza Las Américas, Puerto Rico’s huge shopping mall.

Peruvian nurses protest low wages, miserable working conditions

Hundreds of nurses in Peru’s social security system protested in front of the office of the International Labor Organization (ILO) June 19, the ninth day of a strike for better wages and labor conditions. Many of the nurses chained themselves together to dramatize their demands. A delegation handed over some documents detailing the issues to ILO representatives.

The nurses, whose union has 10,000 members nationwide, went on strike June 10 to protest supply shortages, inadequate wages, and severe understaffing. The average wage is equivalent to US\$600 per month. The nurses are demanding \$1,428.

Protest against housing shortage by Brazilian homeless workers

Thousands of members and supporters of the Brazilian Homeless Workers Movement (MTST) held a protest March June 18 in Sao Paulo. The protesters blocked one of the city’s main freeways to demand affordable housing.

MTST held the protest the day before the second World Cup match to be held in the Southern Hemisphere’s largest city. The organization had previously said that it would not hold protests during the World Cup games, but “group members said they are now protesting because city council members are trying to block rules that would help them get more affordable housing,” according to Echo Netdaily.

Chilean metro workers strike for wage raise

On June 17, workers for Metro Valparaíso (aka Merval), the metro system serving Gran Valparaíso, Chile, went on strike to press their demand for a 10 percent wage hike. Members of the Merval Machinists Union voted for the action due to the enterprise’s refusal to raise its offer above a little more than 1 percent.

Merval consists of one line, 43 kilometers (27 miles) long, serving 20 stations connecting Valparaíso with several suburbs. It is administered by Metro Regional de Valparaíso S.A., a subsidiary of the Chilean state-owned train company Empresa de los Ferrocarriles del Estado. Some 70,000 commuters use Merval.

The union agreed to meet with management with a counteroffer June 20. Secretary general José Ruiz told reporters that “we’ll take advantage [of the meeting] to refute some remarks by the director [Marisa Kausel] and we want to settle.” He admitted that there existed “a great possibility that the strike will be ended.”

Argentine professors reject wage raise offer, stay on strike

Professors in 50 colleges and 27 universities in Argentina voted June 18 to reject a salary offer and continue their nationwide strike. The educators are members of a number of unions, including Conadu, Conadu Histórica, Fagdut, Fedun, UDA and CTERA.

In negotiations, the unions demanded a 40 percent salary raise, while government negotiators offered phased-in raises of 16.5 percent in August and 5 percent each in October and December. A Conadu Histórica press release called the offer “insufficient” and “shameful” since inflation continues to eat away at salaries.

Participation in the strike was high, ranging from 80 to 100 percent.

Strikers marched and demonstrated in some cities. In Buenos Aires, members of the Educators Union Association cut off traffic at a downtown intersection and marched to the Education Ministry, where the fruitless negotiations had taken place. At San Juan Bosco National University of Patagonia, teachers demonstrated, singing, playing bombós (traditional drums) and clapping in a campus hall. Veterinary science faculty at the National University in the city of Casilda held a march and public class.

However, unity among the various unions was lacking, with some, like those at the National Universities in Tucumán, Cuyo, Río Cuarto, Rosario and Del Sur (in Bahía Blanca) advocating an indefinite strike, while others called for returning to work June 24.

The United States

New York Condo workers strike over intimidation and low pay

Condominium workers at the Printing House in Manhattan’s West Village went on strike June 11 after the management contractor threatened to fire a worker who spoke about low pay to a reporter at the *Villager*. Kevin Samuel, a porter with 15 years at West Village, described how workers make between \$12 to \$16 an hour working at the luxury condominium where apartments are sold for prices from \$1.3 million to \$7 million.

During Hurricane Sandy, Samuel was compelled to work a full week without rest. Instead of getting overtime, he was given a flat \$500 for the whole week. Samuel told the *Villager*, “I took the money because I needed it. But I couldn’t believe that. I didn’t even have a chance to go home to my family during the storm, to see how they were doing. And what did I get for it? Basically nothing.”

A number of wealthy residents at the Printing House charge majority owner Myles Horn with creating labor problems at the Condominium. Resident Bonnie Simon told the New York Observer, “Several months ago, we submitted a petition to the board showing that a majority of us supported a union contract.” Frank Nervo, another resident, said, “A number of us are not happy with a situation where the board is essentially exploiting these people in our name. We can only assume it’s to keep the common charges artificially low.”

Management has hired temporary workers to replace the striking condominium staff. The Service Employees International Union has filed an unfair labor practices suit against management.

Pennsylvania water workers picket

The 144 workers at Pennsylvania American Water Company began picketing June 18 in what they are calling a lockout under the state’s labor laws and have applied for unemployment compensation. On June 9, management unilaterally implemented its “last, best and final offer” following negotiations with the Utility Workers Union of America Local 537.

That proposal contained a \$3.55 an hour wage increase over three years. But it also contained a clause that would allow management to hire independent contractors that could assume the work previously

done by the UWUA.

The union is arguing that under Pennsylvania law, when management changes the “status quo” of a labor-employer relationship, the situation is treated as a lockout. The company maintains an impasse in contract negotiations occurred, which allows them to unilaterally impose their terms. The union contends they agreed to continue working under the old terms while negotiations resumed.

Canada

Toronto area city workers strike

1,600 city workers in the Durham region, east of Toronto, walked off the job last Thursday and voted over the weekend to continue the strike by rejecting the Region’s “final offer.”

The strike affects paramedics, child-care and court service workers, and health inspectors who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The central impasse in the dispute arises from concession demands by the employer regarding benefits and sick days for paramedics.

Paramedics are required to continue working during the strike due to essential service requirements, but most day cares have been closed and numerous other services halted or reduced.

Scabs deployed in BC Aerospace strike

At least 10 replacement workers have been brought in to Abbotsford, British Columbia to cross the picket line of 440 striking workers at Cascade Aerospace in a move that the union, UNIFOR, has said will prolong the strike that began on June 4.

Despite assurances by the company at the outset of the strike that they would not bring in replacements, last Saturday they were flown in by Toronto-based MDM Aero Contract to work at Cascade, which is contracted by the Department of National Defense (DND) to repair and overhaul military aircraft.

Workers including technicians, painters and mechanics at Cascade voted almost unanimously to go on strike after working without a contract since the end of March. They are fighting a raft of concession demands for what the company is calling “operational flexibility”.



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