Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 July 2014

Latin America

Mexican pharmaceutical workers strike for unpaid wages

About 70 workers at Robles and Fernández Pharmaceuticals and Intercontinental Medications (Farmaceúticas Robles y Fernández S.A. de C.V. e Intercontinental y Medicamentos S.A. de C.V.) in Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico walked off the job on July 4 to demand back wages, a share of profits and a salary raise. The workers are members of the Confederation of Workers of Mexico (CTM).

According to CTM official Oscar Sánchez Solano, the legal representatives of the firms, Tania Villafuerte Pérez and Guillermo Sumano, have shut themselves off from any agreement, delaying negotiations in order to stall for time before the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board. He said that the workers might have to intensify their actions, including blockades, absent a response from Intercontinental.

Sánchez Solano added that Intercontinental was planning to close its Oaxaca office and skip town, moving operations to other cities, including Michoacán, where it successfully bid on a contract to supply that city's health sector. This was despite the fact that it has a reputation for poor quality medicine, being denounced by one Oaxaca hospital where patients under medication woke up during surgical operations.

Sánchez Solano told adnsureste.info that "in all the regions of Oaxaca, there are 350 union employees in the CTM who are awaiting a favorable solution to their labor demands from the Alvarez Candianis, owners of the enterprises."

Protests, strikes by Puerto Rican government workers against fiscal emergency law

Limited protest actions have continued in Puerto Rico against the governor's plans to unload the island's fiscal crisis on the backs of the working class. On July 2, thousands of government workers carried out a 24-hour strike against the so-called "fiscal emergency law" that will cut wages, benefits, pensions and labor rights for state workers.

Unions of the state-owned power and water and sewer companies and others called the action. Protesters assembled in front of San Juan's Minillas Government Center, location of several government departments and agencies, where union officials denounced the law.

Trinidadian pilots stage sickout over outstanding wage and workload issues

Flights from Trinidad—both domestic and international—on Caribbean Airlines Ltd (CAL), Trinidad and Tobago's flag carrier and national airline, were disrupted July 1 when several rostered pilots called in sick. The number of sickout calls eventually reached 47. The pilots returned to work the next day.

Media coverage of the industrial action mostly reported on the inconvenience to passengers and the response of management. However, one sentence in the July 2 *Trinidad Express* noted the cause of the action: "The pilots allegedly took the drastic action because they are dissatisfied with their workload, which they say is too much, as well as their compensation package, which they say is too little."

A July 3 email to *guardian.co.tt* said, "As someone who knows several CAL pilots, I am aware that they have been dissatisfied with their pay packages and other conditions of employment for at least two years. I heard recently that some monthly allowances which the pilots had been receiving were suddenly withdrawn, even without discussion with TTALPA, the pilots' representatives." The email also decried the handsome salaries that government officials award themselves.

The pilots' union, the Trinidad and Tobago Airline Pilots Association (TTALPA), waited until July 4 to make a statement that it "understood fully the frustration of its individual members" and had pointed these concerns out to CAL on "numerous occasions," but that TTALPA did not sanction industrial action.

The statement added, "TTALPA has never demanded anything of CAL and has utilized a non-confrontational approach through dialogue, which over the years has been rewarded with broken promises and procrastination." However, the *Express* noted on July 4, "The union said that as of Wednesday, it had reached a partial agreement on some of the more serious issues, with further meetings scheduled for the month with CAL."

Chilean national police attack, arrest striking pension fund workers

About 100 employees at Chile's AFP Habitat pension fund manager have been on strike since June 6 over management intransigence regarding salaries, profit sharing and the length of the collective contract. The workers' demands include a salary increase, the retention of a 33 percent bonus, profit sharing and a contract that lasts for two years instead of the four-year period on which AFP Habitat management insists.

AFP Habitat was founded in 1981 during the Pinochet dictatorship's privatization drive and is based in Santiago, Chile. According to *bnamericas.com*, it "is controlled by the Chilean construction chamber and is the country's second largest AFP [pension fund administrator] in number of affiliates."

A union spokesman told reporters, "We have 27 days of continuous strike and our employer keeps on with this enormous intransigence. It absolutely refuses to give anything. It shields itself in not having the economic conditions; however, the profits from 2013 and the first trimester of 2014 tell a different story."

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After 27 days of management's refusal to negotiate, the striking workers assembled at the firm's Santiago headquarters and stepped into the pouring rain to block Providencia Boulevard. They were soon met by special forces of the Carabineros national police, who used water cannon to disperse them. Three protesters, among them their union president, María Eugenia Zamorano, were arrested.

Strike by Argentine gas workers to demand raise

Workers in the Petroleum, Gas and Biocombustibles Federation began an indefinite strike throughout Argentina July 3 following the collapse of negotiations with employers' representatives. The workers are calling for a 30 percent raise.

Federation secretary general Alberto Roberti told reporters, "The union organization, in addition to apologizing to the entire population, places all responsibility on the enterprises who have ignored the claims of the workers in the face of the gravity of the situation that has been posed." Roberti named about 10 firms, including Shell Gas, YPF Gas, Petrobras Gas Division and Axion Energy.

Argentine newspaper workers buck union, strike for salary raise, job security

Workers at the Argentine daily newspaper *Página/12* struck July 1 over management's lack of response to their wage and job security demands. The action was preceded by a stoppage on June 25. On July 2, striking workers served mate cocido (herb tea) in front of the building for two hours, burned tires and blocked traffic.

A group of workers called the Internal Commission (CI) denounced "the second consecutive absence by the enterprise at the hearing called by the Labor Ministry to deal with the growth of irregularities" regarding over 100 contract editors "who do not earn seniority, do not get vacations, do not have licenses, do not get travel allowances and suffer precarious working conditions."

Another complaint is the obsolete technology that the editors have to work with, like Novell Netware, which was discontinued in 2009.

The strike was a rebuke against the Buenos Aires Press Workers Union (UTPBA) leadership, who had gone over the heads of its elected delegates and signed an agreement granting 26 and 28 percent raises in three installments, the last in 2015. Considering the nation's galloping inflation rate, the raise would likely signify a pay cut.

According to a report in the daily *Clarín*, "The opposition questions the legitimacy of the leadership, whose mandate has been expired since September of last year."

The United States

Pennsylvania nurses strike against assault on wages, health care and staffing issues

Pennsylvania nurses at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital launched a five-day strike starting July 4 in a protest over the parent company's demands concerning health care coverage, staffing and wages. In particular, management is seeking contract language that will allow them to change health insurance coverage for the 480 striking nurses at any time during the contract. Elaine Weale, an emergency room nurse and president of the Wyoming Valley Nurses' Association, told the *Citizens Voice* the measure "would render the entire agreement meaningless."

Staffing is also a problem plaguing nurses. According to the union, the hospital suffers from constant turnover. At a rally on the second day of the strike, Sandy Belles, a 36-year veteran nurse, told strikers, "I'm tired of doing what's good for their bottom line instead of doing what's good for the patients."

Wilkes-Barre General Hospital went from non-profit to for-profit when Community Health Systems (CHS) Inc., a Fortune 500 company based in Franklin, Tennessee, bought it out in 2009. CHS is the largest for-profit hospital chain in the United States with 206 hospitals in 29 states. Chairman and CEO Wayne T. Smith pulled down a total compensation package of $8.8 million in 2013.

In 2011, CHS was accused of overbilling Medicare and was subpoenaed by the federal health care program for its "aggressive" billing practices.

California nurses strike over wages and staffing

Some 360 registered nurses at Parkview Community Hospital Medical Center in Riverside, California walked out on strike July 3 after voting overwhelmingly to reject hospital management's pay offer and refusal to address staffing issues. United Nurses Association of California had been asking for a 3.3 percent increase for each of the first two years and a modified wage structure in an effort to move salaries up from the bottom third ranking for salaries in the area, but Parkview management would only agree to a 2.5 annual percentage hike.

On June 19, nurses rejected an earlier contract proposal by 94 percent and the recent proposal by 85 percent last week. The rebuffs came despite the fact that the union leadership declined to make any recommendation concerning the contract to the rank and file.

According to Steve Popkin, Parkview's CEO, the union leaders "came to us and asked us to help avoid a strike. We gave them an out."

Canada

Strike looms at Canada's newspaper of record

Reporters, columnists and other staff at the *Globe and Mail*, one of the country's largest daily newspapers and the main voice of Bay Street, are poised to strike in the coming days after voting overwhelmingly to reject management's latest offer last week, since which time they have been working without a contract.

There are a number of contentious issues in the proposed contract between the company and the union, Unifor, including job security, wages and the requirement for writers to produce "advertorial" copy in addition to other editorial work.

Tensions have heated up in recent days with reporters and columnists refusing to put their bylines on stories and the company erecting a chain-link fence in anticipation of a possible lockout at their offices in Toronto. The paper has said that it will continue to publish in the event of a strike using management and non-unionized staff, while unionized workers have indicated a plan to launch a rival publication in the event of a strike or lockout.

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