

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 July 2014

Latin America

Mexican *maquiladora* workers defy union, strike over sale of business

Several dozen employees of a former Johnson Controls border factory (known as a *maquiladora*) located in Reynosa, in the northeastern Mexican border state of Tamaulipas, demonstrated July 18 to protest the firm's plan to fire 213 workers engaged in a strike. Holding banners and wearing brightly colored T-shirts, demonstrators called "Honk to support us!" to motorists passing by the company's entrance.

Johnson, a huge multinational conglomerate, has been moving away from the automotive sector and in January sold its automotive electronics division to Visteon. With around 30 plants in Mexico, Johnson Controls has earned notoriety for poor pay, long workdays, mandatory overtime, arbitrary firings and denial of labor rights. So-called "protection unions" are enlisted to keep the labor force disciplined.

Workers struck to demand assurances from Visteon that what seniority, labor rights and job security they have will not be undermined, but their union, which calls the sale a "management substitution," refuses to support the striking workers. Indeed, it is attempting to isolate them.

David Gómez Hernández, attorney for the Maquiladoras Syndicate at the Reynosa plant, has called the strike "inappropriate, illegal and arbitrary," claiming, "The unions are the ones that are accredited to convene and call a strike."

At a July 18 press conference, a representative of the striking workers, appealing to the population for support "in order to resolve this in a manner favorable for the workers," noted that "the union leaders are living off the workers, off the backs of the working class."

Mexican university workers end 46 days on strike with signing of agreement

A strike by workers at the Technological University of Morelia (UTM) in the Mexican state of Michoacán was lifted July 18 following the signing of an agreement between UTM authorities and the workers' union, the UTM Workers Single Syndicate. Union members took down the characteristic red and black strike flags and vacated occupied buildings. Classes for the 1,400 UTM students are scheduled to resume July 28.

The strike broke out June 2 "in the face of the lack of agreements to resolve themes like violations of the Collective Work Contract (CCT) and ... the irregular contracting of personnel," according to a *Cambio de Michoacán* report. Although UTM and the union had agreed to some provisions, the rector had

failed to carry them out. In fact, the workers went on strike the year before over the same demands.

The agreement was signed after the intervention of the government secretary, who mediated "intense rounds of negotiations" at which the rector eventually agreed to abide by the Rules of Admission, Permanence and Promotion of Personnel for the September-December 2014 trimester.

In addition, they "agreed that the individual work contracts for determined and undetermined time ... that at the date have not been underwritten will be settled at the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board, the agency that will attest to the signing in a period of no more than 30 days." A "Mixed Capacitation Commission" will "elaborate a work program that will be applied at the beginning of next month, August," as reported in *mimorelia.com*.

Strike by Colombian doctors against nonpayment of salaries, dangerous working conditions

Doctors at the San Rafael de Itagüí Hospital in Antioquia, Colombia walked off the job July 16 to demand the payment of four months of overdue salaries. Emergency services were not affected.

Hospital administration blames the delays on the Health Promoting Entity, or EPS, which has not delivered payments to the hospital. One doctor, on condition of anonymity, told *caracol.com*, "They've gone four months without paying us and they say that there's no money, that the EPSs haven't paid and that if the EPSs don't pay the hospital, the hospital doesn't pay the doctors."

At least a dozen doctors have been compelled to quit, and the 22 who remain resolved to strike until a solution to precarious conditions is found. The doctor added, "We don't have many guarantees, they don't pay us overtime, they don't pay us shift differentials, nor for Sundays, they don't acknowledge the work that we do in the hospital."

Chilean protesters march in support of striking pharmacy workers

About 100 protesters in the southern Chilean city of Temuco marched downtown in support of striking workers at the city's Cruz Verde (Green Cross) pharmacy branch. Similar actions have taken place in Tobalaba, Concepción, Talcahuano and other cities and communes around the nation. About 650 workers are involved in the nationwide stoppage.

The workers have been on strike since June 24 over wages, working conditions and management's refusal to discuss the demands with the workers' union, known as Union 1. The union has already lowered its demands, but Cruz Verde executives claim that it does not have the money to raise wages and benefits beyond a token amount.

National strike by Argentine port workers over contract noncompliance, wage demands

The Grain Receivers Union (URGARA) of Argentina launched a nationwide strike July 16, affecting the export of grains, soybeans, corn and their byproducts at major ports. According to the union, the action was called after a deadline had run out for URGARA and the Port and Maritime Activities Chamber (CAPyM) to resolve outstanding issues.

URGARA, affiliated with the General Labor Confederation (CGT), consists of workers whose job is to verify and determine the quality of grains, cereals and byproducts like flour and oil. The stoppage paralyzed activities at all terminals in San Lorenzo, San Martín and Timbúes (north of Rosario).

The union blamed the “lack of response” of the CAPyM “to find a solution to the salary conflict.” The parties had agreed to a five-day period to hammer out an agreement mediated by the Labor Ministry but, accused URGARA head Alfredo Hugo Palacio, “there wasn’t any solution to the meeting that we just ended.”

“The Cereal Exporter Center refuses to comply with the Collective Work Agreement, and also we demand of the Private Ports Chamber a 45 percent salary raise and a one-time nonremunerative sum of 5,000 pesos (US\$614) in anticipation of salary negotiations,” said Palacio. He added, “We don’t rule out the possibility of a national strike in all branches, ports, exportation and storage.”

On July 18, URGARA bureaucrats met with government officials. By that time, activity at Rosario, the main port accounting for 80 percent of export traffic, had about 100 vessels waiting in the Río Paraná to be unloaded. According to a CGT official, “It was decided to lift the strike at zero hour Saturday [July 19].” The CGT and URGARA scheduled a meeting with the government’s cabinet chief for July 21, after which they were to decide on their next step.

United States

New union proposal in California transit strike

The union representing over 250 striking transit workers in Bakersfield, California put forward a new proposal July 18 on the fourth day of a strike over wages and workers’ resentment over exploitation by management of part-time status. The Golden Empire Transit (GET) District and Teamsters Local 517 have been engaged in six months of failed negotiations and drivers and mechanics voted by a 119-11 margin to strike after a contract extension ran out on July 14.

The GET system employs 70 full-time bus drivers and 147 part-time drivers. The pay and benefits for part-timers are inferior and management will often press part-timers to work hours comparable to full-time drivers. Workers are now demanding a new three-year contract that eliminates this discrepancy and provides for yearly 4 percent wage increases. GET management has been adamant in its insistence on lower pay for part-timers, pointing to uncertainty about state funding for transportation.

The new proposal by the Teamsters indicates they are offering partial concessions on the workers’ demands. GET officials demanded that the union first get rank-and-file endorsement for the proposal while the union has insisted on management’s agreement before submitting it to the ranks. Neither management nor Teamsters officials would divulge the terms of the new proposal.

Canada

Montreal casino workers stage one-day strike

One thousand one hundred workers at casinos in Montreal and Lac-Leamy outside Ottawa held a one-day strike last week after working without a contract for over 15 months.

Croupiers and other staff at the casinos are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and are employed by Loto-Québec, the provincially run gaming agency which has cut over 500 jobs in the last four years and is planning to implement new “efficiencies” in coming years.

The union has said that issues such as wages or benefits have yet to be negotiated because of the employers’ refusal to bargain in good faith.

Nova Scotia town locks out electrical workers

Electrical workers in the Town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia were locked out by the municipally owned utility last week after management received strike notice from their union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW).

Contract talks between the town and the five workers affected reached an impasse over the issue of accumulated sick days which the workers are asking be paid out on retirement, but the employer is offering to pay only 30 percent of unused sick leave.

Replacement workers have been brought in and the mayor of Antigonish has said that electrical service to customers will not be affected by the dispute.



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